

ACME

April No. 36

75¢

M A G A Z I N E O F
HORROR

THE BIZARRE, THE FRIGHTENING, THE GRUESOME



**THE GRISLY
HORROR**

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

**THE VESPERS
SERVICE**

by WILLIAM R. BAUER

DREAD EXILE

An Eerie Tale
by PAUL ERNST

THE TESTAMENT OF ATHAMMAUS

A Tale Of Growing Terror, by CLARK ASHTON SMITH



An Important Message To Every Man And Woman In America Losing His Or Her Hair

If you are troubled by thinning hair, dandruff, itchy scalp, if you fear approaching baldness, read the rest of the statement carefully. It may mean the difference to you between saving your hair and losing the rest of it to unwanted baldness.

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M A G A Z I N E O F HORROR

THE BIZARRE, THE FRIGHTENING, THE GRUESOME

Volume 6

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

Robert A. Madio, Sam Moskowitz, *Consultants*

MAGAZINE OF HORROR, Vol. 6, No. 6, April, 1971 (whole number 36). Published bi-monthly by Health Knowledge, Inc. Executive and editorial offices at 140 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10011. Single copy 75c. Six-issue subscription \$4.00 in the U.S., Canada, and Pan American Union. Foreign, \$4.50. Manuscripts accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes will be carefully considered, but the publisher and editors will not be responsible for loss or damage. All payments for accepted contributions are made on publication. Copyright©1971 by Health Knowledge, Inc. All rights reserved under Universal International and Pan American copyright conventions. Printed in U.S.A.

The Editor's Page

"My reason for writing stories is to give myself the satisfaction of visualizing more clearly and detailedly and stably the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy which are conveyed to me by certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images encountered in art and literature. I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius for our sight and analysis. These stories frequently emphasize the element of horror because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions. Horror and the unknown or the strange are always closely connected, so that it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage and 'outsideness' without laying stress on the emotion of fear. The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly drama-

tic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression" (Quoted by permission of Jack Chalker.)

Thus writes H. P. Lovecraft, opening his brief article, *Notes on the Writing of Weird Fiction*, which originally appeared in a fan magazine, *THE AMATEUR CORRESPONDENT*, May-June 1937. It was reprinted a year later in the Spring 1938 issue of *SUPERMUNDANE STORIES*; then in the 1944 Arkham House collection, *Marginalia*; and most recently in The Anthem Series' *Mirage on Lovecraft*, 1965. All of these sources are out of print, and this is a shame, as the essay (along with HPL's *Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction*) ought to be in print for its value to beginning writers.

One needs to discriminate, of course; but that is the case with any instruction or suggestion to the new writer, and particularly the article or essay where an established author relates his own personal preferences and practices — although this form of writing about writing can be more valuable than general suggestions. No one becomes popular or established whose work does not have broad, universal features that transcend his personal interests and limitations; and certainly no one writer's work,

however popular for the moment, which remains so over decades is lacking in the universal element. The individual stresses may be a strength here or a weakness there; some of them may be a general flaw in the works as a whole, but this doesn't matter. It is the universal element that counts, and that is one reason why *The Iliad* can move the receptive reader today, despite the fact that few believe today that there was a war between the Greeks and the Trojans anything at all like that described in the poem, and fewer still care about the issues involved. Homer touches on matters that are common to humanity and have not ceased to be common two or three thousand years later.

What, then, is universal in this opening paragraph of Lovecraft's essay? Why, isn't it obvious? First, the fact that fear is an emotion common to all of us; second, the fact that fear is nearly always aroused by that which appears to be unnatural and alien; third the fact that a particular sort of fear accompanies any suspicion or illusion of natural law being suspended or actually broken. Despite the reference to "shattered natural law" toward the end of the paragraph, which, taken out of total context could give the impression that Lovecraft considered this a possibility (however improbable), what he really means is the *illusion* of such suspension that is frightening, and that his aim is to produce the *illusion* in his stories – not to convince the reader that, even if the fantastic events he describes actually occurred, natural law can either be suspended or shattered. The event, then, must prove only our ignorance or misconceptions concerning the laws of the universe.

Thus the struggle against some menace in weird and terror fiction is the struggle to understand what is happening, to discover the why and the how of it, and something of its limitations (in

other words, the laws governing it) so that these can be used to combat and possibly overcome it – or at least to find protection against it. You find this element in the great works of "supernatural" fiction, where forces and beings which can and do suspend or violate natural law appear. But over and above these are "supernatural" laws through which these anomalies can be dealt with.

Certainly a dead body, a corpse from which the spirit of its inhabitant is supposed to have departed, which nonetheless comes to a grisly sort of "life"; wherein the spirit of the person does, after all, reside but now entirely expressed as evil, however good the person may have been before being attacked by another vampire and finally dying from the results – certainly the undead, which live on fresh blood but have no circulation in their animated cadavers do not conform to what appear to be natural laws. A miracle of evil appears to have occurred. But the persons in *Dracula* who are trying to destroy the Count and his followers, learn that while these undead do have strange and horrible powers, they also have limitations that can be counted upon – in other words, they operate under law and according to this law; there are times and circumstances where the vampire can be rendered helpless, or can be repulsed, or can be done away with altogether.

Dracula was not the first vampire story in fiction, but my impression is that there were not very many written and published prior to Bram Stoker's novel, which appeared in 1897. It is at least likely, however, that his was the first fiction wherein the various legends are collected and laws of vampirology drawn up from them. Since no actual vampire seems to have appeared to contradict Stoker's Laws, or to demonstrate error in the application of them, they can be accepted – and have largely been

EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN

*presents in its 61st
issue, April 1971*

THE CLUE IS IN PHYSICS

by Jerry L. Keane, Ph.D.

THE GHOSTS AT PELICAN INN

by Lisa Proctor

ASTROLOGY AND NEW RELIGIONS

by Louise Landry

NUCLEAR EXPLOSION IN 1908?

by Andrew W. Skware

THE MYSTIC VISION

by Edward Y. Breese

accepted by weird story writers who employed the vampire theme thereafter.

But Stoker's laws have no authority beyond that which another writer freely accepts. A reader of *WEIRD TALES* objected to Robert E. Howard's *The Horror from the Mound* (which appeared in the May 1932 issue, and was reprinted in the Arkham House collection, *Skull Face*, now out of print) on the grounds that Howard did not observe Stoker's Laws, and judged the tale to be a very bad one for this reason. I would not call it one of Howard's best (although Mr. Dérleth has a differing opinion, since he included it in the first Howard collection) but the last ground upon which I would proclaim it a bad story would be that of violating Stoker's Laws of vampirology. No matter how excellent and orderly and convincing they are, they should not become binding and obligatory upon further writers who want to deal with vampires; for to accept such ground rules as standard is to shackle the imagination of writers and destroy the very basis of good weird fiction — the freedom to make new rules for each story. (It might have been better had Howard acknowledged the existence of Stoker's Laws and then shown them to be in error — or not applicable in this place, for reasons that Stoker was unaware of when he wrote *Dracula*.)

What is important is that the weird story writer have some sort of ground rules for the story he is writing now, and in some way make it clear to the reader that while the laws (natural or supernatural, if the writer wants to accept the notion of supernatural laws — either through personal belief or convenience for the sake of the story) may appear to have been violated or suspended — thus producing the element of terror desired — this is illusion. An illusion is a false appearance. It is not an hallucination, something which exists

only in the nervous system of a single person, even though it may appear as a projection so that the person swears it is there outside. I could not see your hallucination, though I might see one of my own, not entirely dissimilar. But we could both see the same illusion, and a mirage in the desert or elsewhere, or the apparent blankness of the sea before us, when actually a camouflaged ship is well within our range of vision, represent positive and negative illusions respectively. More subtle is the illusion that this table upon which my typewriter stands is solid, or that my new razor blade has a straight edge; a physicist can show me that the table is anything but solid, and a good microscope can shatter the illusion of the fresh razor blade having anything like a straight edge.

Thus, the great (long-enduring) weird tales have ever had the one theme of illusive disorder and the struggle to find order within it. The struggle has not always been successful, and need not be. A weird tale does not have to have either a happy ending, in the conventional sense, nor again need everything be explained and tied together, as one should find in science fiction — at least, relating to the most essential elements in the story. The weird terror tale essentially gives glimpses, "vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions", as Lovecraft puts it, and the element of fear must be distinctly present; the weird tale which is not a weird terror tale (or a horror story) need not stress fear or deal with that emotion at all, but rather concentrate upon "wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy". The element of mystery is relevant to both sorts. Thus, to look at HPL's stories themselves for short, simple examples, I would call *In the Vault* a weird-terror tale; *Pickman's Model* a weird-horror story; and *The Strange, High House in the Mist*

STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES

*Presents in its 18th
issue, March 1971*

THE GOLDEN PATIO

a strange tale

by Aubrey Feist

* * *

THE STORM THAT HAD TO BE STOPPED

by Murray Leinster

* * *

THE CLEANING MACHINE

a new story

by F. Paul Wilson

* * *

DROME OF THE LIVING DEAD

a bizarre novellet

by John Scott Douglas

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a weird tale of wonder, Terror and horror are so woven in to his novels, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and *At the Mountains of Madness*, that one can argue indefinitely over whether they should be labelled terror or horror tales – and the latter, of course, is perfectly legitimate science fiction.

What is entirely ruinous, however (and I see this all too frequently in the mss. that come in to my office) is arbitrariness, which indicates that the writer has decided that since he is writing weird fiction, anything goes. Nothing could be farther from the truth about good weird fiction. You may have heard (and correctly) that HPL often used dream material in his fiction, and that one short story, *The Wicked Clergyman* is a transcribed dream. All this proves is that HPL used dreams as a starting point, but worked them out as thoroughly, from the original fragmentary inspirations (and whether they came when he was asleep or awake hardly matters), as does the writer of any good science fiction tale. The first story mentioned above was thoroughly worked-out in the dream itself, and some of us have these now and then; but they are rare, and I suspect that a worked-out story, good enough to publish essentially as it was in the dream, is the most rare of all. (In my own experience, I do have dreams now and then where – in the dream – I say to myself, "This would make a terrific story – I must remember it and jot it down when I wake up!" And I've come to, and managed to jot it down – just enough to reveal to my waking mind that it's trite and trashy to boot. Such dreams might be of value to a psychotherapist, but are useless for the purpose they appear to serve.)

Lovecraft wrote weird stories primarily for his own satisfaction, but it would be an error to assume that he was

disdainful of the thought of earning money from his fiction. The difficulty was that the market for weird stories between 1923, when the debut of *WEIRD TALES* gave him the first semblance of a genuine vehicle for his fiction, and 1937, when he died, was a very small one. Not only were the magazines which would take weird stories few, but those few were, as he often complained, ridden by formula. Edwin Baird, the original editor of *WEIRD TALES*, published *Dagon*, *The Picture in the House*, *The Hound*, *The Rats in the Walls*, etc., only because the owner of the magazine, the late J. C. Henneberger, accepted them over the editor's editorial head. Farnsworth Wright was more friendly and open, but even then, many HPL stories were rejected (although some were returned because Wright could not afford to pay his top rate for a story this length, and would not consider Lovecraft for less than the best he could pay), although some of these were accepted upon later submission. Many of the Lovecraft tales appearing in the magazine after his death, however, had been rejected while he was alive.

His two biggest sales came about by fortuity. Wright had rejected *At the Mountains of Madness* (and possibly *The Shadow Out of Time*, although I am uncertain about this), and a friend of Lovecraft, Donald Wandrei, took the two manuscripts to F. Orlin Tremaine, then editor of *ASTOUNDING STORIES*. Tremaine was eager to obtain every well-known name in the field for his magazine, and on being assured that these two stories were science fiction, bought them virtually on sight. They appeared in the February-March-April and June 1936 issues, respectively, and for the rest of the year, *Brass Tacks* (the letters department) was well-filled with attacks upon Lovecraft and a minority of defenses. The stories simply did not

conform to science fiction formulas and were written on a literary level far in advance of the standard favorites in the magazine. Whether Tremaine would have bought further material from HPL, had the latter lived longer, is debatable; Tremaine himself moved out of the editor's seat at *ASTOUNDING STORIES* late in 1937, and turned the magazine over to John W. Campbell, who, so far as I know, has never been partial to Lovecraft. (At least, he did not publish *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* in *UNKNOWN*; and since Donald Wandrei was a contributor to that magazine in 1939, I would assume that he tried to interest Campbell in the story before letting it go to *WEIRD TALES* in 1940, where it was published early in 1941. But this is conjecture, and Campbell may never have had the opportunity to consider that novel at all, for other reasons.)

The situation is better today, in that there are a number of magazines using new weird tales and weird terror tales, and these markets do not insist upon the pulp formula - which, although good for certain types of fiction, is particularly fatal for really worthwhile weird fiction. (Not that an excellent weird tale cannot be written, or has never been written and published, according to this formula, but that the overwhelming majority of weird stories written to it are not excellent: the formula itself precludes certain types of excellence, and the weird story belongs in these areas.) However, this will always be a limited field of fiction, since only persons with not just imagination, but a particular bent of imagination are going to be attracted to magazines specializing in the weird tale. And we must remember that one reason for the existence of the pulp formula in the first place is that the majority of pulp readers supported this sort of story, and did not

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like deviations from it, except in rare instances. *ARGOSY* could afford to run a considerable number of "different" stories because the magazine appeared each week, and the bulk of the contents were formula fiction.

Most of the Munsey fantastic novels did remain within the boundaries of the formula, with their intrepid heroes, exquisite villainesses, beautiful but relatively insipid heroines, decidedly caddish villains, action galore, and perfectly conventional motivations and endings. Otis A. Kline's novels were fun to read, but one was as alike the next one as one enjoyable western was like the next one. Ray Cummings showed far more imagination in his backgrounds, but the story varied so little from one novel to the next that I wonder how the readers' suspense managed to be maintained at all. It's one thing to know in advance that the hero is going to win in the end; it's another to know from experience just about exactly what moves will be made by each side — yet, a number of these novels remain enjoyable. However, enduring masterpieces they are not.

Good weird fiction depends heavily upon inspiration for those "vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions"; but as HPL indicates in the rest of the article, solid work in conscious secondary elaboration is most of it. Lovecraft states in his essay:

"In writing a weird story I always try very carefully to achieve the right mood and atmosphere, and place the emphasis where it belongs....this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one given marvel. This marvel must be treated very impressively and deliberately —

with a careful emotional 'build-up' — else it will seem flat and unconvincing. Being the principal thing in the story, its mere existence should overshadow the characters and events. But the characters and events must be consistent and natural except where they touch the single marvel....

"Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is a *vivid picture of a certain type of human mood*. The moment it tries to be anything else it becomes cheap, puerile, unconvincing...."

From the manuscripts I receive (and from some printed tales I've read), a number of beginning writers seem to have gotten at least part of the point above — but are under the illusion that in order to be natural and consistent, a character must be repulsive, ignorant, vicious, and in order for a setting to be believable, it must be sordid, filthy, etc. Now it is entirely true that such characters exist in the world and that such settings exist; thus, if a story requires either or both of these elements, then the portrayal of them should, indeed, be convincing. It is not true, however, that realism and reality is confined to such things, even though a good deal of contemporary propaganda (some of it disguised as literary criticism) would have you believe this. Of course, it is much easier (and perhaps emotionally cathartic) to describe vice than virtue, ugliness than beauty, stupidity than intelligence, etc. However, to employ a current phrase where it is, in my opinion, truly apt, such a choice on the part of the new writer (because everybody else is doing it) represents a cop-out. RAWL

DREAD EXILE

by PAUL ERNST

(author of *The Duel of the Sorcerers*)

The name PAUL ERNST, first appeared to readers of *WEIRD TALES* in the October 1928 issue, on a story entitled *The Temple of Serpents*; starting with the January 1929 issue, the editor of WT started to reprint stories for earlier issues of the magazine the readers had requested, and this Ernst tale was among them, although it did not actually appear again until the July 1932 issue, long after Farnsworth Wright had passed from the scene. Only one Ernst tale was reprinted while Wright was still editor: *A Witch's Curse* but two further ones were honored in the '30s: *The Tree of Life* and *Wife of the Dragon Fly*. He appeared twice in *STRANGE TALES*, with *The Duel of the Sorcerers*, a long novelet, which we reprinted in two parts in issues 31 and 32, February and May 1970, and the present tale. He is, of course, better known for his numerous science fiction appearances, which started with *Hidden in Glass* in the April 1931 issue of *AMAZING STORIES*.

THE FACT THAT I HADN'T HEARD the man come into the room is not to be wondered at. Living on the third floor of a hotel in one of the noisiest spots in the city, I can scarcely hear my own footsteps sometimes. Besides, I was tired out from a strenuous day; and I may have dozed for a few moments over my book.

Nevertheless, it was with a start that I suddenly looked up to find I had a visitor. And such a visitor!

Before me, standing in the gloom just outside the circle of light cast by my reading lamp, was one of the tallest men I had ever seen. And one of

the thinnest. Like a human tent-pole he stood there, with a voluminous topcoat billowing loosely over his thin frame in a tent-like way that completed the simile. The fact that he should wear a coat was in itself remarkable, for it was a roasting hot summer night. Why a man should bundle himself up as this one did, was certainly beyond my comprehension.

The collar of the coat was drawn up, and the brim of his black felt hat was pulled down so that all I could see of his face were his eyes, gleaming like live coals. The coat swelled hugely over his chest, as though a bundle was concealed under his coat; and this protrusion gave him the appearance of a grotesque, stoop-shouldered pouter-pigeon.

"Hello!" I exclaimed. "How did you get in here?" A silly question. Obviously he had walked in. On hot nights I often leave my door on the latch, and he could have done so easily. But I was taken so unawares, so oddly disturbed by something about the look of him, that I could speak only nonsense.

He said nothing, but just stared at me with his gleaming eyes.

"I didn't hear you come in," I went on.

Still he made no reply, merely gazing at me out of those piercing eyes and standing before me in the gloom, this stoop-shouldered pouter-pigeon of a man. I wondered what was in the big bundle concealed over his chest.

"What do you want?" I demanded then, annoyed at his crazy silence, and disquieted by his eyes. In my work as a reporter I have had to do several times with people mentally unbalanced; and I didn't half like the glints in those unblinking eyes. "What do you want?" I repeated.

Now at last, he spoke. "I want to tell you a story!"

His voice was most peculiar. He treated English in a way unfamiliar to me. Not as a foreigner would, with a broad accent; but as a man might who had seldom spoken at all, in any language. His voice was thick and creaky, and his tongue formed syllables as though it had been made of wood. A dumb man, who had but recently learned to talk, might have spoken as this man did.

At his peculiar answer, my annoyance and disquiet increased. At two o'clock in the morning a man you've never seen before in your life comes into your room, and, at your repeated demands as to what he wants, says he wants to tell you a story!

The fellow moved closer and I noticed that he was unsteady on his long legs. I saw that he was frightfully emaciated from some illness; it couldn't have been from starvation, for the excellence of his topcoat indicated a well-lined purse. And then I saw his hands.

Long, thin, with talon-like fingers, they were more closely covered with hair than any human hands I'd ever seen before. And the hair was peculiar. It was fine, close-set, more like fur than hair.

He saw me gazing at them, and abruptly thrust them into the pockets of his coat. "This is to be a long story," he said, in that curious, muffled voice of his. "May I sit down?" He moved uncertainly toward a chair.

"Certainly, sit down," I replied. I started up to help him, but he waved me away as though fearful of my touch.

He seated himself, sighed deeply, and began:

"I want to tell you this story because you are a writer and may be able to get it before the public eye. Publicity! It is the only way I can think of to have justice done. I cannot go to the police. They would laugh at me. Publicity is the only answer—and even that may be useless..."

He sighed again, the manner of which struck me as very odd. I mean, he sighed for so long a time. For seconds on end the air was exhaled steadily from his lungs, and still it issued forth. It is hard to convey the queeriness of it. Draw into your own lungs as much air as you can. Exhale it as slowly as you can, till it is all gone. Multiply by three the number of seconds your exhalation endured, and you will have about the length of time this man's sigh lasted.

A trivial thing to mention, yet I can't describe how the oddity of it struck me. It indicated, you see, that the big bundle that swelled out his coat over his chest, was not a bundle at all—but the chest itself. And who ever saw, particularly on a thin and narrow shouldered man, a chest measuring some seventy inches around?

"Uncover your typewriter, please, and take down my story," was my bizarre visitor's demand. "I'll speak slowly so you can get it all."

Now this seemed unbearably high-handed. My expression must have showed that I was about to protest. The man's eyes gleamed more brightly. His hands, thrust in his coat pockets, moved a little as though they had been convulsively clenched.

"Take down my story!" he said, his voice very harsh now. "Quickly! I have little time left me here!"

By now I was thoroughly convinced, naturally, that I was dealing with a lunatic. It became a question of humoring him till I could make up an excuse for telephoning, and call for help. I moved to the card table on which my typewriter was resting, and sat down before it.

He began to dictate, abruptly, without preliminaries, as a man might wander into a public stenographer's office, dictate a letter, only to wander casually out again with no explanations of any kind.

"My name," he began, "is well known to you. But I will not reveal it till later. You wouldn't believe me if I told you now.

"My story has to do with a theft as incredible as it is horrible, by a thief that no detectives could ever run down; that no power save aroused public opinion can ever bring to justice.

"It began two days ago, when I was a young man with a healthy, athletic body, a fortune with which to indulge it, and not a care on Earth."

I started, here, and gazed in amazement at my mad visitor. Young? He looked to be at least sixty! Athletic body? He was as emaciated as death, with his skinny shoulders stooped as though with the weight of whatever it was that bulged out the breast of his coat so far! I calculated the distance to the telephone stand, decided I couldn't reach it without a fight that might be disastrous to his feeble old frame, and resumed my typing. My visitor went on:

"Two days ago, almost to the hour, I got my indication of the change that was to come swiftly and fatally into my life. Two short days ago! In those forty-eight hours I passed from life to death, from sane health to mad dissolution... But I'll try to keep from wandering, George, and give you this as it all happened."

Again I started with amazement. This queer stranger knew my name and used it intimately, yet I knew I'd never seen him before. But I did not interrupt his narrative.

"I was sitting alone in the bedroom of my apartment in town when it happened—this first step in the change that was to be mine. I had dismissed my man for the night, and was smoking a last cigarette before getting into bed and snapping off the lights. At my feet lay my dog, Flix, his eyes half shut and his tail thumping the floor occasionally when I let my hand slide down over the arm of my chair to touch his head.

"The first thing I noticed was that it had suddenly become very quiet. Amazingly quiet for the city. It was as though a shell of silence had been drawn around that room, shutting out the sounds of late traffic, making the quiet so intense that it almost hurt.

"Wondering a little at it, I put out my cigarette, and started to rise from my chair. But I sank back into it again as my eyes happened to rest on Flix, at my feet.

"The dog, of a sudden, was acting very queerly. His head had jerked up as though on a string. His eyes, wide and alert, were staring into a dark corner of the room, as though they saw something I could not see.

"Even as I watched, a phosphorescent greenish glare came into those

eyes. His lips twitched back from his fangs and a low growl sounded deep in his throat. Slowly he got up and stood, trembling slightly, while his eyes continued to probe the darkened corner.

"Perplexedly, I, too, stared at the corner. There was absolutely nothing to be seen. It was only dimly lit by the reading light above my head; but it was illuminated enough to show there was nothing there. Nothing!

" 'What's up, Flix?' I murmured, patting the dog's head. To my astonishment he moved away from my hand as though not recognizing its touch, and growled louder as he shrank back from the empty corner. There were minute whitish flecks on his jaws now.

"Still I had no warning premonition of the tremendous thing that was about to happen. It had been a hot day; Flix's coat is furry; the heat might have affected him. Vowing to clip him next morning, I got up and opened the bedroom door and ordered him out of the room. The corridor was cooler, anyway; and out there he wouldn't disturb my sleep by snarling feverishly at imaginary burglars all night.

"He slunk out, and I got into bed. For one more moment I gazed at the corner that had held Flix's attention. In that moment a distinct feeling of uneasiness, of ill-being, came over me. But I ignored it, and turned out the lights.

"However, sleep would not come. Wakefully I tossed, and watched the sinking moon send its slanting rays more and more levelly in through my window. The feeling of disquiet grew within me till, for no reason whatever that I could think of, I was in the grip of actual horror.

"I was, I admit, in the unreasoning frame of mind where a man can see and hear anything. Had I never again seen and heard what happened a moment later, I'd have gone to my death thinking it was only the product of imagination.

"My eyes had continually strayed to that corner, now sunk in blackness unpenetrated by the moonlight. And now it seemed they rested on other eyes. A pair of eyes that peered from the gloom about six feet from the floor, where the eyes of a tall man might be—if, of course, there had been a man there.

"Increasingly apparent, the eyes became. Now I could see them clearly enough to read their expression—or it seemed I could. And the expression was one blended of desperation and invincible purpose. Furthermore, the eyes were red!

"Red eyes! I don't mean they were blood-shot. The whites were clear rings around the pupils. The pupils themselves were red. Red as fire; red as crimson glass beads.

"I stared into those red eyes as though hypnotized, unable to make a move or a sound. Spellbound. I've often heard that word used. I know now what it means!

"And then I began to make out a shadowy background for the eyes: a human seeming head; a tall, dim body. All seemed to materialize out of empty air as though conjured up by my fancy.

"I lay there, breathless, staring at the shadowy head in which were set those burning, fire-red eyes, glinting with desperate purpose. From the street, seeming to penetrate with difficulty the shell of silence drawn around the room, came the single toot of a motor horn. Its prosaic sound seemed but to intensify the reality of the impossible vision growing ever clearer before my gaze.

"Now I fought with the helplessness that bound my muscles. I struggled to get out of bed, to spring to the corner and come to grips with this inhuman thing—or to prove to myself that there was nothing there after all.

"I couldn't move a finger. And as I lay there, with my heart thumping in my breast and cold sweat standing out on my forehead, I distinctly heard a low, soft sigh. A voice came to my ears:

" 'Go to sleep. I will you go to sleep.' "

"At that a film seemed to gather before me. The red, red eyes faded into far distances. The flooding moonlight went dark. Swiftly, against all the protest of my quivering senses, I *did* go to sleep! It was as though I'd been chloroformed.

"I couldn't have been sunk long in that unearthly sleep. Five minutes, perhaps. For when my eyes jerked open again the moon's rays had slanted very little lower.

"I was waked by the sound of my own voice. And for an instant, in a helpless sort of daze, I floated in a half-slumber where I could hear strange words coming from my own lips as though I were another person standing off at a distance and listening to myself.

"And strange indeed were the words! Incredible! Incomprehensible! ~ " '...exiled...doomed forever...never to leave this ghastly place and go back home...racked and wasted by disease...but another body...' "

"And this raving, this mumbling of thoughts that could not possibly have originated in my brain, was yet coming from my lips! As though I had suddenly become a mere mouthpiece for another's mind!

"I stirred slightly, and tried harder for full wakefulness. Slowly it came, as the chains of my nightmare were broken. And with wakefulness came

an increase of the unreasoning horror that had gripped me since I had turned out the lights.

"With an exclamation that should have been a shout, but which was hardly more than a whisper, I sat up.

"Standing in the corner, disclosed by the moonlight, was a man's figure. Complete in every detail I saw it—from sunken cheeks and fire-red eyes, to emaciated legs and unbelievably swollen chest.

"For an instant we stared at each other. Then, with an enormous effort of will, I tensed my muscles for a spring. A little of the hypnotic tension that had held me was released, somehow, by the realization that this figure was after all of solid flesh and blood.

"The man must have read my purpose in my eyes, for he started to move aside. But before he could, I had launched myself at him.

"My hands tore at his throat...

"For a fleeting second my fingers pressed against solid substance. Then the column of the throat drained away like water running out of a tap. Another second and my fingers had met and were pressing only against each other. Under me the form I'd sprung upon, and had thought was flesh and blood and bone, was gone. I collapsed against the chair, utterly alone in the room.

"Shuddering, with my eyes starting from my head, I stared around me. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing! Yet I had clearly seen that figure in the chair—had felt it for a moment.

"I thought I heard a footstep outside the door, and the next instant I heard Flix howl in the hall, as if the dog had seen something pass out through the wood panels of the door. Then there was silence.

"The silence was now a normal one, broken frequently by the night noises of the city. The queer shell of quiet that had seemed to surround the place was lifted. Reassured a little by the familiar discords that told of people living and moving all around me, I got back into bed.

"But I didn't go to sleep. I couldn't! Instinct told me surely that I had narrowly escaped something awful and final. What could it be? What kind of thing was it that had sat in that chair, staring at my sleeping form with its flame-red eyes? What kind of creature could appear and disappear at will, and pass through solid wood doors? Something weird and supernatural, something inexplicable to the mind of man, had kept vigil over me in my room! That was all I knew.

"Wide-eyed and wakeful, I waited for day to come and for the honest sunlight to relieve me of the freezing fear that still clutched me.

"In the morning I did feel better. I had managed to compose myself a little during the slow hours of dawn. I was beginning to be convinced somewhat when I told myself the fears of the night had been entirely ungrounded and due to nightmare-induced superstition. I had imagined a spectral figure, and had been childishly horrified by it, that was all. Tall men with red eyes don't really appear and then disappear, under one's very fingers, into thin air. Flix had growled at nothing, and on that flimsy foundation I had built the things I'd thought to see and hear during the night.

"After my morning shower I stepped to the mirror and inspected myself critically. It was reassuring to look at my square-jawed, tanned face and the muscular, tanned body under it. They were so palpably the face and body of a man who ought to have a well balanced mind; who should certainly know better than to let himself 'see things' during the night.

"I dressed and went to the breakfast table, feeling more and more foolish about the nocturnal absurdity I'd indulged in. And there, just as I was succeeding in dismissing all thought of the vision of the night, something occurred that started again the cold sweat that had drenched me during the black hours.

"My servant, the man-of-all-work who went with me everywhere, held out a hat. It was a black felt hat with a down-drooping brim, like no hat I'd ever worn.

"'Whoever visited you last night after I was gone, sir,' he said, 'went off without his hat. Shall I call and return it, or shall I just—'

"He stopped there and stared, with open mouth, at my face. I have no doubt my face was arresting enough. I could feel it go chalk white as I gazed at that hat. And I braced myself with my hands on the table as the room began to revolve crazily around me.

"'Just keep it, Saunders,' I managed to say at last. 'Maybe the—person—who left it will come back for it.'

"But after a while I got over even that shock. Indeed, after I'd thought it over, the incident looked hopeful rather than alarming.

"There actually had been a man in my room. The hat proved it. That released me from the charge of childish superstition, and also from the suspicion that perhaps my mind wasn't as well balanced as I'd always assumed it was. There *had* been a man there.

"How had he melted away under my throttling fingers? How had he hidden in the corner where I'd first seen those implacable red eyes? There was no place in that corner to hide. Why hadn't I seen him at once, as Flix

apparently had? And how had I come to fall asleep in spite of all my effort not to—and half waked to hear myself mumbling those strange things?

"These questions, at first apparently unanswerable, I worked out promptly enough. At least to my own satisfaction. Hypnotism! All I'd seen and heard and felt had been transmitted to my brain from that of the red-eyed stranger. He had broken into my room somehow, and from the moment of his entrance had taken hypnotic charge of my thoughts. Why? For the purpose of common burglary, probably.

"There it was: nothing to be alarmed about. All could be explained in a logical, common sense way. God, what mockery is logic, common sense...

"I followed my regular routine for the rest of the day. I kept a tennis engagement in the afternoon, and a dinner engagement in the evening. But I went back to my rooms early. I was thick-witted from lack of sleep, and felt that an extra long night of rest was in order.

"Now, on that second night I was sure I'd be let alone. Having been convinced by the black felt hat that my visitor was solid and mortal enough, I had put him comfortably out of my thoughts. It seemed reasonable that the midnight marauder would avoid visiting the same spot two evenings in succession. The man with the curious eyes would know that this time I'd be prepared for him. He'd stay away, of course.

"So, secure in my damned logic, I prepared again for bed.

"I had taken a few precautions, however. My man, instead of going home to his own rooms, was to sleep in my flat that night, in the dining room next door to my bedroom. My automatic, freshly oiled and loaded, was placed on a chair beside my bed. Flix, absolved like his master of 'seeing things' was to sleep in my bedroom. If the red-eyed trespasser was foolhardy enough to call again, he'd find a warm reception waiting for him!

"Hardly had I got into bed when the opening incident of the night before was repeated: noises coming in from the open window were curiously stilled. Once again it was as though a shell of silence had been drawn about the room. A hush descended in which the beating of my own heart seemed unbearably loud—a hush broken only at rare intervals by some unusually penetrating street noise. A second time I was gripped by the vague horror, the feeling that something terrible and supernatural was threatening me.

"Flix howled once, and scrambled under the bed, where I could hear him squirm in an abject attempt to make himself as small as possible. Flix, who had proved time and again that he would attack man or beast with utter recklessness when his master was menaced!

"Simultaneously with that, I could see, in the dark corner, a pair of clear red eyes grow more and more distinct. And now at last I knew, with a thrill of such fear as I never thought a man could endure, that my visitor was repeating his call, that it would be his last, and that he—or it—was never of this earth!

"The room was unlighted this time. It was not yet late enough for the moon to slant in the windows. In this thick, even darkness, I saw the eyes come closer and closer to me.

"And now something happened that I hardly know how to tell about.

"It seemed as though those eyes were, somehow, drawing the soul and mind and consciousness of me out of the shell of my body and into their own red depths! They were draining the real me from the mold of my flesh!

"I panted and groaned as I tried to combat the hypnotic glare of those eyes in which desperation and resolve were blended in equal parts. I strained to reach the gun on the chair beside me, and a long drawn out, soft sigh sounded in my ears, and a voice said: 'Go to sleep. Do not struggle. Go to sleep.'

"I felt darkness close around my senses like a blanket. And I was washed with great waves of terror. I must not lose consciousness! This thing with the red eyes must not bind me, helpless, for my own destruction!

"I groaned, 'Flix!' I whispered, 'Flix! Get him, boy, get him.'

"I heard a faint whimper from under the bed, but that was all. I remembered my man, who was staying here at my orders.

"'Saunders! Here—for God's sake.'

"With the last words my whispering had sunk to inaudibility. There was no move in the hall to indicate that Saunders had heard my low cry and was coming.

"And still those fearful red eyes bored into mine, draining me, draining me, pulling the heart and soul and mind of me.

"'Go to sleep,' the voice crooned again. 'To sleep...'

"Frantically I willed to stay awake. It was essential to the thing's plan that I lose consciousness. Well, that I would not do!

"But I knew as I vowed it that it was beyond my power to resist. This creature, whatever he was, and from whatever unearthly sphere, was stronger willed than I.

"Things blackened before me. I was sinking into oblivion. I could see only those hypnotic red eyes. They too faded. I was done!

"When I next woke, or rather, partially woke, the moon had circled the

sky so that its first steep rays were crawling over the window sill. I strained to wake fully, and to get my bearings; I could do neither. Swallowed in a black sea of fear I lay in a coma while the awful, unbelievable drama played itself out. I will try to tell about it, just as it happened.

"I saw the red eyes again. But it seemed to me they came from the bed. My bed! From a shadowy head resting on the pillow. My pillow! From a vaguely seen, tanned and square-jawed face that was horribly, impossibly familiar to me...

"I glanced down, and my eyes rested on the arm of a chair—the chair in which for a fleeting second I had seen the dim, emaciated body the night before. But surely I was still in the bed. How had I got to the chair? Or—was I in the chair?

"For a moment I stumbled in a dread shadowland where I was in two places at once—and in neither place. Oh...I can't describe it.

"The voice sounded in my ears that I had heard before. And the voice, one moment, seemed to come from the figure lying on the bed; and the next, from the chair. And when it came from the chair, I was in the bed, and when it—Oh, God!

"The voice rambled along, not as though addressing me, but as if speaking aloud the thoughts of the mind that ruled it:

"I am taking his body. In another moment the transfer will be complete. I shall have escaped death. The terrors that infest this globe! The cruel perils, the bestial men and raw, untamed elements! Above all, the awful diseases!

"'Exiled! I shall never get back to the lovely globe called, by these brute people, Mars. My own body, evolved to exist in its thinner air, is about to die of their hideous diseases. My new body, evolved for Earth's atmosphere, will never let me go back. The puny, insufficient lungs in this small chest...

"I am an exile for all of time! Doomed to live here, in one body or another, till I tire of it and allow my spirit to die with whatever form encases it at the moment. Was it for this I went exploring, on the wings of thought?"

"These were the words I heard in that low, strange voice. And toward the end of the fantastic soliloquy, I noticed something that sent my senses reeling, and plunged me once more into unconsciousness.

"The voice, shifting less and less often from the form on the bed to the form in the chair, at last was coming continually from the bed! And the voice was now my own voice! And I who heard it was sitting definitely in the chair!

"That was the last thing I knew for an unguessable length of time.

"My next awakening was slower, more complete and normal. But if the awakening was normal—the surroundings, the conditions I woke to find myself in, were not! They were unbelievable! Impossible! Terrible!

"My first sensation was that I was cold. Frightfully cold. Yet somehow I did not suffer.

"I could feel under me a frigid, smooth slab of something. It felt like marble to the touch of my limp hands. I could dimly hear a constant dripping of water. A grim odor came to me—a mixture of chemicals and death. If death were a flower, and a perfume were distilled from that flower, it would be somewhat like the ghastly aroma that came to my nostrils then.

"I tried to move, and could not. I tried to speak, and felt my lips stiff and cold as ice. I tried to open my eyes, and felt my eyelids like twin small curtains of ice that would not move.

"Then I sensed a figure bending over my body. I heard words that brought shriek after shriek to my ice cold lips, battering there for the utterance they were denied.

" 'I have never seen such a curious enlargement of the chest,' the unseen person was saying. 'The lungs must be huge. I wonder... We must have an autopsy. And how wasted the body is! The man was a walking pest-house. Where did you find him?'

" 'Floating in the river,' answered another unseen one. 'No marks of identification of any kind.'

"The unseen talkers moved away. While I—I wrestled with the cold flesh that tied me down. Wrestled, and was hopelessly defeated. For I was dead...

"After a time I discovered something that gave me a slight ray of hope—not that I could regain my own healthy, living body which this traveler from a far planet had usurped, but that I might tell my story and have the usurper killed before he stole other people's bodies.

"I found that, with his wasted, disease-racked, dead frame, I had inherited some slight trace of his marvelous ability to will himself from place to place. I could not move the solid flesh by thought transference as he could; but I could transport my intelligence, clothed in a semblance of the body.

"When I stopped wrestling with the cold clay that tied my spirit down, I found I could rise quite easily. Too easily, in fact, for no thing of weight ever soared as lightly upward as I did.

"From beside the marble slab I stared down at the shell I had left, but to which I was still chained. I saw, line for line, the body of the monster that had robbed me of life and flesh. The tall, emaciated form; the long, thin hands, covered with fine, mouse-colored fur; the sunken cheeks; the enormous chest, twice as big as that of any average mortal—in a word, the body you seem to see me wearing now.

"I gazed, soul-sick, at that travesty of the human form, and reflected that I would shortly be exiled with it to the grave. Exile? The creature who had robbed me faced an exile far less fearful than mine!

"And then I came to you. For you, George, will try to have this story published, and let the people know of the alien horror that stalks in their midst. And you will try to get justice done the murderer of—John Carmody."

At the mention of that name I felt the breath catch in my throat, while my heart pounded in the grip of a superstitious terror.

I had been amazed at this stranger's mention of a dog named Flix, and utterly astounded at his further mention of a servant named Saunders. For both those names were familiar to me. Now, to have him go on and claim he was John Carmody, one of my closest friends and as husky a young athlete as ever inherited a million dollars, was appalling!

But I climbed determinedly out of my momentary lapse into credulity. These were names any one could find out easily.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" said the tall stranger. "I swear I'm not. George, look at me! Closely! My eyes—my expression."

Almost against my will I searched that pallid face, now disclosed to me by the turning down of the coat collar. Of course I found there no shadow of proof of the madman's claim. The eyes were certainly not those of my friend, Carmody. Nor were they red.

There was nothing to be done but call assistance and have the maniac put away as gently as possible. I got up from the chair before my typewriter, and moved close to him.

"I've taken down your story," I told him soothingly. "I'll see that it's brought to public notice, and that justice is done. Now don't you think you ought to turn in for the rest of the night? I'll call the room clerk and have him find a place for you—"

"I read your thoughts as though your forehead were made of glass," said the man wearily. "Well, I didn't really hope I'd be believed. I could only try. And now I've got to be getting back to my body."

"Your body is right here," I said. "Don't worry."

"You fool!" he blazed. "If you don't believe what I'm telling you—try

to touch me. Your hand will go through me as it would through a bit of fog."

With this I turned to the telephone. Regardless of the risk to his feeble body, it was time to end this farce. I must phone the house doctor, and have him put in custody.

Hardly had I turned my back when some sixth sense warned me to whirl around again.

I did so, crouching instinctively to defend myself against a maniacal attack—

The man was gone.

Dumbfounded, I glanced around the room. There was nowhere he could have hid. I dashed to the door, though I was sure he could not have reached it in the second my back was turned to him. There was no one in the long corridor outside.

The man was gone, as though he had indeed been but an intelligence clothed in the mere semblance of a body—a bit of fog dispelled by a breeze.

Such was my strange visitor's story, set down precisely as he dictated it. Such was his exit.

A creature from distant Mars dragging his body here by thought transference? Attacked unexpectedly by half a dozen fatal diseases unknown on his sphere? Projecting his iron will from his own dying, huge-chested frame into the small-chested frame of an Earthman, and hence chaining himself forever to the denser atmosphere of Earth? Who would believe such a thing.

I didn't, of course. But, more for curiosity than any other reason, I began some quiet investigating. The results were rather strange.

Well, I'll give them to you so that you may have all the facts in your judging of this fantastic tale.

John Carmody is at this moment—two days after the eerie visit the pouter-pigeon of a man paid me—still in his town flat. I called on him, and he refused to see me, though we have been close friends for years. He sent out word that he was preparing for a long trip and was at that time too busy to see anybody.

Saunders confided to me that he is going to leave Carmody's employ as soon as he can. In the last two days Carmody has been acting so strangely that Saunders is uneasy: he denies himself to all his old friends, and constantly performs deep-breathing and other chest expanding exercises. Too, his eyes have taken on a curious reddish tinge that alarms and puzzles Saunders.

Carmody's dog, Flix, had to be taken away day before yesterday. It had gone mad; and alternately tried to attack his master, and fled howling from him.

On a marble slab in the morgue lies the most unusual corpse. It is the body of a very tall man, incredibly emaciated, with fine furry hair on the backs of the hands, and with a malformation of the chest that makes it look like the remains of an enormous pouter-pigeon. In every detail it is the twin brother of the madman who called on me six hours after this one's reported death.

These are the facts. Make of them what you wish.

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a demonic novelet

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*the first half of the complete
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THE TESTAMENT OF ATHAMMAUS

by CLARK ASHTON SMITH

(author of *A Rendezvous in Averoigne*, *The Nameless Offspring*, etc.) -

This story falls into the author's series of tales taking place in Hyperborea. The wizard Elbon is mentioned in various tales in the series (and I seem to remember, also in stories outside the series) and this apparently is his habitat, although he is not present in the story you are about to read. Rumor hath it that the Ballantine edition of *Zothique* has done well, and that Lin Carter has prepared a collection dealing with Hyperborea to follow the initial Smith volume. It is possible, alas (for me that is), that some Smith story will thus be duplicated in our pages, the softcover collection having appeared before I could remove a story from an issue; as you know, I do not want to run tales here, however fine, that are available in softcover collections of fantasy. But so long as it is feasible, I shall continue to bring you CAS's work which was out of print at the time I had it set up.

IT HAS BECOME NEEDFUL for me, who am no wielder of the stylus of bronze or the pen of calamus, and whose only proper tool is the long, doublehanded sword, to indite this account of the curious and lamentable

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happenings which foreran the universal desertion of Commoriom by its king and its people. This I am well fitted to do, for I played a signal part in these happenings; and I left the city only when all the others had gone.

Now Commoriom, as every one knows, was aforetime the resplendent, high-built capital, and the marble and granite crown of all Hyperborea. But concerning the cause of its abandonment there are now so many warring legends and so many tales of a false and fabulous character, that I, who am old in years and triply old in honors, I, who have grown weary with no less than eleven lustrums of public service, am compelled to write this record of the truth ere it fade utterly from the tongues and memories of men. And this I do, though the telling thereof will include a confession of my one defeat, my one failure in the dutiful administration of a committed task.

For those who will read the narrative in future years, and haply in future lands, I shall now introduce myself. I am Athammaus, the chief headsman of Uzuldaroum, who held formerly the same office in Commoriom. My father, Manghai Thal, was headsman before me; and the

sires of my father, even to the mythic generations of the primal kings, have wielded the great copper sword of justice on the block of *eyghon*-wood.

Forgive an aged man if he seem to dwell, as is the habit of the old, among the youthful recollections that have gathered to themselves the kingly purple of removed horizons and the strange glory that illumines irretrievable things. Lo! I am made young again when I recall Commorion, when in this gray city of the sunken years I behold in retrospect her walls that looked mountainously down upon the jungle, and the alabastrine multitude of her heaven-fretting spires. Opulent among cities, and superb and magisterial, and paramount over all was Commorion, to whom tribute was given from the shores of the Atlantean sea to that sea in which is the immense continent of Mu; to whom the traders came from utmost Thulan that is walled on the north with unknown ice, and from the southern realm of Tscho Vulpanomi which ends in a lake of boiling asphaltum. Ah! proud and lordly was Commorion, and her humblest dwellings were more than the palaces of the other cities. And it was not, as men fable nowadays, because of that maundering prophecy once uttered by the white sybil from the isle of snow which is named Polarion, that her splendor and spaciousness were delivered over to the spotted vines of the jungle and the spotted snakes. Nay, it was because of a direr thing than this, and a tangible horror against which the law of kings, the wisdom of hierophants and the sharpness of swords were alike impotent. Ah! not lightly was she overcome, not easily were her defenders driven forth. And though others forget, or haply deem her no more than a vain and dubitable tale, I shall never cease to lament Commorion.

My sinews have dwindled grievously now; and Time has drunken stealthily from my veins; and has touched my hair with the ashes of suns extinct. But in the days whereof I tell, there was no braver and more stalwart headsmen than I in the whole of Hyperborea; and my name was a red menace, a loudly spoken warning to the evil-doers of the forest and the town, and the savage robbers of uncouth outland tribes. Wearing the blood-bright purple of my office, I stood each morning in the public square where all might attend and behold, and performed for the edification of all men my allotted task. And each day the tough, golden-ruddy copper of the huge crescent blade was darkened not once but many times with a rich and wine-like sanguine. And because of my never-faltering arm, my infallible eye, and the clean blow which there was never any necessity to repeat, I was much honored by the King Loquamethros and by the populace of Commorion.

I remember well, on account of their more than unique atrocity, the

earliest rumors that came to me in my active life regarding the outlaw Knygathin Zhaum. This person belonged to an obscure and highly unpleasant people called the Voormis, who dwelt in the black Eiglophian Mountains at a full day's journey from Commorion, and inhabited according to their tribal custom the caves of ferine animals less savage than themselves, which they had slain or otherwise dispossessed. They were generally looked upon as more beast-like than human, because of their excessive hairiness and the vile, ungodly rites and usages to which they were addicted. It was mainly from among these beings that the notorious Knygathin Zhaum had recruited his formidable band, who were terrorizing the hills subjacent to the Eiglophian Mountains with daily deeds of the most infamous and iniquitous rapine. Wholesale robbery was the least of their crimes; and more anthropophagism was far from being the worst.

It will readily be seen, from this, that the Voormis were a somewhat aboriginal race, with an ethnic heritage of the darkest and most revolting type. And it was commonly said that Knygathin Zhaum himself possessed an even murkier strain of ancestry than the others, being related on the maternal side to that queer, non-anthropomorphic god, Tsathoggua, who was worshipped so widely during the subhuman cycles. And there were those who whispered of even stranger blood (if one could properly call it blood) and a monstrous linkage with the swart, Protran spawn that had come down with Tsathoggua from elder worlds and exterior dimensions where physiology and geometry had both assumed an altogether inverse trend of development. And, because of this mingling of ultra-cosmic strains, it was said that the body of Knygathin Zhaum, unlike his shaggy, unher-colored fellow-tribesmen, was hairless from crown to heel and was pied with great spots of black and yellow; and moreover he himself was reputed to exceed all others in his cruelty and cunning.

For a long time this execrable outlaw was no more to me than an horrific name; but inevitably I thought of him with a certain professional interest. There were many who believed him invulnerable by any weapon, and who told of his having escaped in a manner which none could elucidate from more than one dungeon whose walls were not to be scaled or pierced by mortal beings. But of course I discounted all such tales, for my official experience had never yet included any one with properties or abilities of a like sort. And I knew well the superstitiousness of the vulgar multitude.

From day to day new reports reached me amid the preoccupations of never-slighted duty. This noxious marauder was not content with the

seemingly ample sphere of operations afforded by his native mountains and the outlying hill-regions with their fertile valleys and well-peopled towns. His forays became bolder and more extensive; till one night he descended on a village so near Commorion that it was usually classed as a suburb. Here he and his filthy crew committed numerous deeds of an unspeakable enormity; and bearing with them many of the villagers for purposes even less designable, they retired to their caves in the glossy-walled Eiglophian peaks ere the ministers of justice could overtake them.

It was this audaciously offensive act which prompted the law to exert its full power and vigilance against Knygathin Zhaum. Before that, he and his men had been left to the local officers of the countryside; but now his misdeeds were such as to demand the rigorous attention of the constabulary of Commorion. Henceforth all his movements were followed as closely as possible; the towns where he might descend were strictly guarded; and traps were set everywhere.

Even thus, Knygathin Zhaum contrived to evade capture for month after month; and all the while he repeated his farflung raids with an embarrassing frequency. It was almost by chance, or through his own foolhardiness, that he was eventually taken in broad daylight on the highway near the city's outskirts. Contrary to all expectation, in view of his renowned ferocity, he made no resistance whatever; but finding himself surrounded by mailed archers and bill-bearers, he yielded to them at once with an oblique, enigmatic smile—a smile that troubled for many nights thereafter the dreams of all who were present.

For reasons which were never explained, he was altogether alone when taken; and none of his fellows were captured either coincidentally or subsequently. Nevertheless, there was much excitement and jubilation in Commorion, and every one was curious to behold the dreaded outlaw. More even than others, perhaps, I felt the stirrings of interest; for upon me, in due course, the proper decapitation of Knygathin Zhaum would devolve.

From hearing the hideous rumors and legends whose nature I have already outlined, I was prepared for something out of the ordinary in the way of criminal personality. But even at first sight, when I watched him as he was borne to prison through a moiling crowd, Knygathin Zhaum surpassed the most sinister and disagreeable anticipations. He was naked to the waist, and wore the fulvous hide of some long-haired animal which hung in filthy tatters to his knees. Such details, however, contributed little to those elements in his appearance which revolted and even shocked me.

His limbs, his body, his lineaments were outwardly formed like those of aboriginal man; and one might even have allowed for this utter hairlessness, in which there was a remote and blasphemously caricatural suggestion of the shaven priest; and even the broad, formless mottling of his skin, like that of a huge boa, might somehow have been glossed over as a rather extravagant peculiarity of pigmentation. It was something else, it was the unctuous, verminous ease, the undulant litheness and fluidity of his every movement, seeming to hint at an inner structure and vertebration that were less than human—or, one might almost have said, a sub-ophidian lack of all bony framework—which made me view the captive, and also my incumbent task, with an unparallelable distaste. He seemed to slither rather than walk; and the very fashion of his jointure, the placing of knees, hips, elbows and shoulders, appeared arbitrary and factitious. One felt that the outward semblance of humanity was a mere concession to anatomical convention; and that his corporeal formation might easily have assumed—and might still assume at any instant—the unheard-of outlines and concept-defying dimensions that prevail in trans-galactic worlds. Indeed, I could now believe the outrageous tales concerning his ancestry. And with equal horror and curiosity I wondered what the stroke of justice would reveal, and what noisome, nephritic ichor would befoul the impartial sword in lieu of honest blood.

It is needless to record in circumstantial detail the process by which Kuygathin Zhaum was tried and condemned for his manifold enormities. The workings of the law were implacably swift and sure, and their equity permitted of no quibbling or delay. The captive was confined in an oubliette below the main dungeons—a cell hewn in the basic, Archean gneiss at a profound depth, with no entrance other than a hole through which he was lowered and drawn up by means of a long rope and windlass. This hole was lidded with a huge block and was guarded day and night by a dozen men-at-arms. However, there was no attempt at escape on the part of Kuygathin Zhaum: indeed, he seemed unnaturally resigned to his prospective doom.

To me, who have always been possessed of a strain of prophetic intuition, there was something overtly ominous in his unlooked-for resignation. Also, I did not like the demeanor of the prisoner during his trial. The silence which he had preserved at all times following his capture and incarceration was still maintained before his judges. Though interpreters who knew the harsh, sibilant Egiophian dialect were provided, he would make no answer to questions; and he offered no defense. Least

of all did I like the unabashed and unblinking manner in which he received the final pronouncement of death which was uttered in the high court of Commorion by eight judges in turn and solemnly reaffirmed at the end by King Loquamethros. After that, I looked well to the sharpening of my sword, and promised myself that I would concentrate all the resources of a brawny arm and a flawless manual artistry upon the forthcoming execution.

My task was not long deferred, for the usual interval of a fortnight between condemnation and decapitation had been shortened to three days in view of the suspicious peculiarities of Knygathin Zhaum and the heinous magnitude of his proven crimes.

On the morning appointed, after a night that had been rendered dismal by a long-drawn succession of the most abominable dreams, I went with my unfailing punctuality to the block of *sighon-wood*, which was situated with geometrical exactness in the center of the main square. Here a huge crowd had already gathered; and the clear amber sun blazed royally down on the silver and nazarat of court dignitaries, the hoddens of merchants and artisans, and the rough pelts that were worn by outland people.

With a like punctuality, Knygathin Zhaum soon appeared amid his entourage of guards, who surrounded him with a bristling hedge of billhooks and lances and tridents. At the same time, all the outer avenues of the city, as well as the entrances to the square, were guarded by massed soldiery, for it was feared that the uncaught members of the desperate outlaw band might make an effort to rescue their infamous chief at the last moment.

Amid the unrelenting vigilance of his warders, Knygathin Zhaum came forward, fixing upon me the intent but inexpressive gaze of his lidless, ocher-yellow eyes, in which a face-to-face scrutiny could discern no pupils. He knelt down beside the block, presenting his mottled nape without a tremor. As I looked upon him with a calculating eye, and made ready for the lethal stroke, I was impressed more powerfully and more disagreeably than ever by the feeling of a loathsome, underlying plasticity, an invertebrate structure, nauseous and nonterrestrial, beneath his impious mockery of human form. And I could not help perceiving also the air of abnormal coolness, of abstract, impenetrable cynicism, that was maintained by all his parts and members. He was like a torpid snake, or some huge liana of the jungle, that is wholly unconscious of the shearing ax.

I was well aware that I might be dealing with things which were beyond the ordinary province of a public headsman; but nathless I lifted the great

sword in a clean, symmetrically flashing arc, and brought it down on the pichald nape with all of my customary force and address.

Necks differ in the sensations which they afford to one's hand beneath the penetrating blade. In this case, I can only say that the sensation was not such as I have grown to associate with the cleaving of any known animal substance. But I saw with relief that the blow had been successful: the head of Knygathin Zhaum lay cleanly severed on the porous block, and his body sprawled on the pavement without even a single quiver of departing animation. As I had expected, there was no blood—only a black, tarry, fetid exudation, far from copious, which ceased in a few minutes and vanished utterly from my sword and from the eighon-wood. Also, the inner anatomy which the blade had revealed was devoid of all legitimate vertebration. But to all appearance Knygathin Zhaum had yielded up his obscene life; and the sentence of King Loquamethros and the eight judges of Commorion had been fulfilled with a legal precision.

Proudly but modestly I received the applause of the waiting multitudes, who bore willing witness to the consummation of my official task and were loudly jubilant over the dead scourge. After seeing that the remains of Knygathin Zhaum were given into the hands of the public grave-diggers, who always disposed of such offal, I left the square and returned to my home, since no other decapitations had been set for that day. My conscience was serene, and I felt that I had acquitted myself worthily in the performance of a far from pleasant duty.

Knygathin Zhaum, as was the custom in dealing with the bodies of the most nefarious criminals, was interred with contumelious haste in a barren field outside the city where people cast their orts and rubbish. He was left in an unmarked and unmounded grave between two middens. The power of the law had now been amply vindicated; and every one was satisfied, from Loquamethros himself to the villagers that had suffered from the depredations of the deceased outlaw.

I retired that night, after a bounteous meal of suana-fruit and djongua-beans, well irrigated with foun-wine. From a moral standpoint, I had every reason to sleep the sleep of the virtuous; but, even as on the preceding night, I was made the victim of one cacodemonical dream after another. Of these dreams, I recall only their pervading, unifying consciousness of insufferable suspense, of monotonously cumulative horror without shape or name; and the ever-torturing sentiment of vain repetition and dark, hopeless toil and frustration. Also, there is a half-memory, which refuses to assume any approach to visual form, of

things that were never intended for human perception or human cognition; and the aforesaid sentiment, and all the horror, were dimly but indissolubly bound up with these.

Awaking unrefreshed and weary from what seemed an eon of thankless endeavor, of treadmill bafflement, I could only impute my nocturnal sufferings to the *djongwa*-beans; and decided that I must have eaten all too liberally of these nutritious viands. Mercifully, I did not suspect in my dreams the dark, portentous symbolism that was soon to declare itself.

Now must I write the things that are formidable unto Earth and the dwellers of Earth; the things that exceed all human or terrene regimen; that subvert reason; that mock the dimensions and defy biology. Dire is the tale; and after seven lustrums, the tremor of an olden fear still agitates my hand as I write.

But of such things I was still oblivious when I sallied forth that morning to the place of execution, where three criminals of quite average sort, whose very cephalic contours I have forgotten along with their offenses, were to meet their well-deserved doom beneath my capable arm. Howbeit, I had not gone far when I heard an unconscionable uproar that was spreading swiftly from street to street, from alley to alley throughout Commorion. I distinguished a myriad cries of rage, horror, fear and lamentation that were seemingly caught up and repeated by every one who chanced to be abroad at that hour. Meeting some of the citizenry, who were plainly in a state of the most excessive agitation and were still continuing their outcries, I inquired the reason of all this clamor. And thereupon I learned from them that Knygathin Zhaum, whose illicit career was presumably at an end, had now reappeared and had signalized the unholy miracle of his return by the commission of a most appalling act on the main avenue before the very eyes of early passers! He had seized a respectable seller of *djongwa*-beans, and had proceeded instantly to devour his victim alive, without heeding the blows, bricks, arrows, javelins, cobblestones and curses that were rained upon him by the gathering throng and by the police. It was only when he had satisfied his atrocious appetite that he suffered the police to lead him away, leaving little more than the bones and raiment of the *djongwa*-seller to mark the spot of this outrageous happening. Since the case was without legal parallel, Knygathin Zhaum had been thrown once more into the oubliette below the city dungeons, to await the will of Loquamethros and the eight judges.

The exceeding discomfiture, the profound embarrassment felt by myself, as well as by the people and the magistracy of Commorion, can well be imagined. As every one bore witness, Knygathin Zhaum had been

efficiently beheaded and buried according to the customary ritual; and his resurrection was not only against nature but involved a most contumelious and highly mystifying breach of the law. In fact, the legal aspects of the case were such as to render necessary the immediate passage of a special statute, calling for rejudgment, and allowing re-execution, of such malefactors as might thus return from their lawful graves. Apart from all this, there was general consternation; and even at that early date, the more ignorant and more religious among the townsfolk were prone to regard the matter as an omen of some impending civic calamity.

As for me, my scientific turn of mind, which repudiated the supernatural, led me to seek an explanation of the problem in the non-terrestrial side of Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry. I felt sure that the forces of an alien biology, the properties of a trans-stellar life-substance, were somehow involved.

With the spirit of the true investigator, I summoned the grave-diggers who had interred Knygathin Zhaum and bade them lead me to his place of sepulture in the refuse-grounds. Here a most singular condition disclosed itself. The earth had not been disturbed, apart from a deep hole at one end of the grave, such as might have been made by a large rodent. No body of human size, or, at least, of human form, could possibly have emerged from this hole. At my command, the diggers removed all the loose soil, mingled with potsherds and other rubbish, which they had heaped upon the beheaded outlaw. When they reached the bottom, nothing was found but a slight stickiness where the corpse had lain; and this, along with an odor of ineffable foulness which was its concomitant, soon dissipated itself in the open air.

Baffled, and more mystified than ever, but still sure that the enigma would permit of some natural solution, I awaited the new trial. This time, the course of justice was even quicker and less given to quibbling than before. The prisoner was again condemned, and the time of decapitation was delayed only till the following morn. A proviso concerning burial was added to the sentence: the remains were to be sealed in a strong wooden sarcophagus, the sarcophagus was to be inhumed in a deep pit in the solid stone, and the pit filled with massy boulders. These measures, it was felt, should serve amply to restrain the unwholesome and irregular inclinations of this obnoxious miscreant.

When Knygathin Zhaum was again brought before me, amid a redoubled guard and a throng that overflowed the square and all of the outlying avenues, I viewed him with profound concern and with more than my

former repulsion. Having a good memory for anatomic details, I noticed some odd changes in his physique. The huge splotches of dull black and sickly yellow that had covered him from head to heel were now somewhat differently distributed. The shifting of the facial blotches around the eyes and mouth had given him an expression that was both grim and sardonic to an unbearable degree. Also, there was a perceptible shortening of his neck, though the place of cleavage and reunion, midway between head and shoulders, had left no mark whatever. And looking at his limbs, I discerned other and more subtle changes. Despite my acumen in physical matters, I found myself unwilling to speculate regarding the processes that might underlie these alterations; still less did I wish to surmise the problematic results of their continuation, if such should ensue. Hoping fervently that Knygathin Zhaum and the vile, flagitious properties of his unhallowed carcass would now be brought to a permanent end, I raised the sword of justice high in air and smote with heroic might.

Once again, as far as mortal eyes were able to determine, the effects of the shearing blow were all that could be desired. The head rolled forward on the eichen-wood, and the torso and its members fell and lay supinely on the maculated flags. From a legal viewpoint, this doubly nefarious malefactor was now twice-dead.

Howbeit, this time I superintended in person the disposal of the remains, and saw to the bolting of the fine sarcophagus of *apha*-wood in which they were laid, and the filling with chosen boulders of the ten-foot pit into which the sarcophagus was lowered. It required three men to lift even the least of these boulders. We all felt that the irrepressible Knygathin Zhaum was due for a quietus.

Alas for the vanity of earthly hopes and labors! The morrow came with its unspeakable, incredible tale of renewed outrage: once more the weird, semi-human offender was abroad, once more his anthropophagic lust had taken toll from among the honorable denizens of Commoriom. He had eaten no less a personage than one of the eight judges; and, not satisfied with picking the bones of this rather obese individual, had devoured by way of dessert the more outstanding facial features of one of the police who had tried to deter him from finishing his main course. All this, as before, was done amid the frantic protests of a great throng. After a final nibbling at the scant vestiges of the unfortunate constable's left ear, Knygathin Zhaum had seemed to experience a feeling of repletion and had suffered himself to be led docilely away by the jailers.

I and the others who had helped me in the arduous toils of entombment were more than astounded when we heard the news. And the effect on the

general public was indeed deplorable. The more superstitious and timid began leaving the city forthwith; and there was much revival of forgotten prophecies; and much talk among the various priesthoods anent the necessity of placating with liberal sacrifice their mystically angered gods and eidolons. Such nonsense I was wholly able to disregard; but, under the circumstances, the persistent return of Knygathin Zhaum was no less alarming to science than to religion.

We examined the tomb, if only as a matter of form; and found that certain of the superincumbent boulders had been displaced in such a manner as to admit the outward passage of a body with the lateral dimensions of some large snake or muskrat. The sarcophagus, with its metal bolts, was bursten at one end; and we shuddered to think of the immeasurable force that must have been employed in its disruption.

Because of the way in which the case overpassed all known biologic laws, the formalities of civil law were now waived; and I, Athammas, was called upon that same day before the sun had reached its meridian, and was solemnly charged with the office of re-beheading Knygathin Zhaum at once. The interment or other disposal of the remains was left to my discretion; and the local soldiery and constabulary were all placed at my command, if I should require them.

Deeply conscious of the honor thus implied, and sorely perplexed but undaunted, I went forth to the scene of my labors. When the criminal reappeared, it was obvious to every one that his physical personality, in achieving this new recrudescence, had undergone a most salient change. His mottling had developed more than a suggestion of some startling and repulsive pattern; and his human characteristics had yielded to the inroads of an unearthly distortion. The head was now joined to the shoulders almost without the intermediation of a neck; the eyes were set diagonally in a face with oblique bulgings and flattenings; the nose and mouth were showing a tendency to displace each other; and there were still further alterations which I shall not specify, since they involved an abhorrent degradation of man's noblest and most distinctive corporeal members. I shall, however, mention the strange, pendulous formations, like annulated dewlaps or wattles, into which his knee-caps had now evolved. Nathless, it was Knygathin Zhaum himself who stood (if one could dignify the fashion of his carriage by that word) before the block of justice.

Because of the virtual non-existence of a nape, the third beheading called for a precision of eye and a nicety of hand which, in all likelihood, no other headsman than myself could have shown. I rejoice to say that my

skill was adequate to the demand made upon it; and once again the culprit was shorn of his vile cephaloid appendage. But if the blade had gone even a little to either side, the dismemberment entailed would have been technically of another sort than decapitation.

The laborious care with which I and my assistants conducted the third inhumation was indeed deserving of success. We laid the body in a strong sarcophagus of bronze, and the head in a second but smaller sarcophagus of the same material. The lids were then soldered down with molten metal; and after this the two sarcophagi were conveyed to opposite parts of Commorion. The one containing the body was buried at a great depth beneath monumental masses of stone; but that which enclosed the head I left uninterred, proposing to watch over it all night in company with a guard of armed men. I also appointed a numerous guard to keep vigil above the burial-place of the body.

Night came; and with seven trusty trident-bearers I went forth to the place where we had left the smaller of the two sarcophagi. This was in the courtyard of a deserted mansion amid the suburbs, far from the haunts of the populace. For weapons, I myself wore a short falchion and carried a great bill. We took along a plentiful supply of torches, so that we might not lack for light in our gruesome vigil; and we lit several of them at once and stuck them in crevices between the flagstones of the court in such wise that they formed a circle of lurid flames about the sarcophagus.

We had also brought with us an abundance of the crimson *foun-wine* in leathern bottles, and dice of mammoth-ivory with which to beguile the black nocturnal hours; and eyeing our charge with a casual but careful vigilance, we applied ourselves discreetly to the wine and began to play for small sums of no more than five *pazoor*s, as is the wont of good gamblers till they have taken their opponents' measure.

The darkness deepened apace; and in the square of sapphire overhead, to which the illumination of our torches had given a jetty tinge, we saw *Polaris* and the red planets that looked down for the last time upon Commorion in her glory. But we dreamed not of the nearness of disaster, but jested bravely and drank in ribald mockery to the monstrous head that was now so securely confined and so remotely sundered from its odious body. And the wine passed and repassed among us; and its rosy spirit mounted in our brains; and we played for bolder stakes; and the game quickened to a goodly frenzy.

I know not how many stars had gone over us in the smoky heavens, nor how many times I had availed myself of the ever-circling bottles. But I remember well that I had won no less than ninety *pazoor*s from the

trident-bearers, who were all swearing lustily and loudly as they strove in vain to stem the tide of my victory. I, as well as the others, had wholly forgotten the object of our vigil.

The sarcophagus containing the head was one that had been primarily designed for the reception of a small child. Its present use, one might have argued, was a sinful and sacrilegious waste of fine bronze; but nothing else of proper size and adequate strength was available at the time. In the mounting fervor of the game, as I have hinted, we had all ceased to watch this receptacle; and I shudder to think how long there may have been something visibly or even audibly amiss before the unwonted and terrifying behavior of the sarcophagus was forced upon our attention. It was the sudden, loud, metallic clangor, like that of a smitten gong or shield, which made us realize that all things were not as they should have been; and turning unanimously in the direction of the sound, we saw that the sarcophagus was heaving and pitching in a most unseemly fashion amid its ring of flaring torches. First on one end or corner, then on another, it danced and pirouetted, clanging resonantly all the while on the granite pavement.

The true horror of the situation had scarcely seeped into our brains, ere a new and even more ghastly development occurred. We saw that the casket was bulging ominously at top and sides and bottom, and was rapidly losing all similitude to its rightful form. Its rectangular outlines swelled and curved and were horribly erased as in the changes of a nightmare, till the thing became a slightly oblong sphere; and then, with a most appalling noise, it began to split at the welded edges of the lid, and burst violently asunder. Through the long, ragged rift there poured in hellish ebullition a dark, ever-swelling mass of incognizable matter, frothing as with the venomous foam of a million serpents, hissing as with the yeast of fermenting wine, and putting forth here and there great sooty-looking bubbles that were large as pig-bladders. Overturning several of the torches, it rolled in an inundating wave across the flagstones and we all sprang back in the most abominable fright and stupefaction to avoid it.

Cowering against the rear wall of the courtyard, while the overthrown torches flickered wildly and smokily, we watched the remarkable actions of the mass, which had paused as if to collect itself, and was now subsiding like a sort of infernal dough. It shrank, it fell in, till after awhile its dimensions began to re-approach those of the encoffined head, though they still lacked any true semblance of its shape. The thing became a round, blackish ball, on whose palpitating surface the nascent outlines of

random features were limned with the flatness of a drawing. There was one lidless eye, tawny, pupilless and phosphoric, that stared upon us from the center of the balls while the thing appeared to be making up its mind. It lay still for more than a minute; then with a catapulting bound, it sprang past us toward the open entrance of the courtyard, and disappeared from our ken on the midnight streets.

Despite our amazement and disconcertion, we were able to note the general direction in which it had gone. This, to our further terror and confoundment, was toward the suburb of Commorion in which the body of Knygathin Zhaum had been entombed. We dared not conjecture the meaning of it all, and the probable outcome. But, though there were a million fears and apprehensions to deter us, we seized our weapons and followed on the path of that unholy head with all the immediacy and all the forthrightness of motion which a goodly cargo of *foum-wine* would permit.

No one other than ourselves was abroad at an hour when even the most dissolute revellers had either gone home or had succumbed to their potations under tavern tables. The streets were dark, and were somehow drear and cheerless; and the stars above them were half stifled as by the invading mist of a pestilential miasma. We went on, following a main street, and the pavements echoed to our tread in the stillness with a hollow sound, as if the solid stone beneath them had been honeycombed with mausolean vaults in the interim of our weird vigil.

In all our wanderings, we found no sign of that supremely noxious and execrable thing which had issued from the riven sarcophagus. Nor, to our relief, and contrary to all our fears, did we encounter anything of an allied or analogous nature, such as might be abroad if our surmises were correct. But, near the central square of Commorion, we met with a number of men, carrying bills and tridents and torches, who proved to be the guards I had posted that evening above the tomb of Knygathin Zhaum's body. These men were in a state of pitiable agitation; and they told us a fearsome tale, of how the deep-hewn tomb and the monumental blocks piled within it had heaved as with the throes of earthquake; and of how a python-shapen mass of frothing and hissing matter had poured forth from amid the blocks and had vanished into the darkness toward Commorion. In return, we told them of that which had happened during our vigil in the courtyard; and we all agreed that a great foulness, a thing more baneful than beast or serpent, was again loose and ravening in the night. And we spoke only in shocked whispers of what the morrow might declare.

Uniting our forces, we searched the city, combing cautiously its alleys

and its thoroughfares and dreading with the dread of brave men the dark, iniquitous spawn on which the light of our torches might fall at any turn or in any nook or portal. But the search was vain; and the stars grew faint above us in a livid sky; and the dawn came in among the marble spires with a glimmering of ghostly silver; and a thin, fantasmal amber was sifted on walls and pavements.

Soon there were footsteps other than ours that echoed through the town; and one by one the familiar clangors and clamors of life awoke. Early passers appeared; and the sellers of fruits and milk and legumes came in from the countryside. But of that which we sought there was still no trace.

We went on, while the city continued to resume its matutinal activities around us. Then, abruptly, with no warning, and under circumstances that would have startled the most robust and affrayed the most valorous, we came upon our quarry. We were entering the square in which was the eighton-block whereon so many thousand miscreants had laid their piacular necks, when we heard an outcry of mortal dread and agony such as only one thing in the world could have occasioned. Hurrying on, we saw that two wayfarers, who had been crossing the square near the block of justice, were struggling and writhing in the clutch of an unequalled monster which both natural history and fable would have repudiated.

In spite of the baffling, ambiguous oddities which the thing displayed, we identified it as Knygathin Zhaum when we drew closer. The head, in its third reunion with that detestable torso, had attached itself in a semi-flattened manner to the region of the lower chest and diaphragm; and during the process of this novel coalescence, one eye had slipped away from all relation with its fellow or the head and was now occupying the navel, just below the embossment of the chin. Other and even more shocking alterations had occurred: the arms had lengthened into tentacles, with fingers that were like knots of writhing vipers; and where the head would normally have been, the shoulders had reared themselves to a cone-shaped eminence that ended in a cup-like mouth. Most fabulous and impossible of all, however, were the changes in the nether limbs: at each knee and hip, they had re-bifurcated into long, lithe proboscides that were lined with throated suckers. By making a combined use of its various mouths and members, the abnormality was devouring both of the hapless persons whom it had seized.

Drawn by the outcries, a crowd gathered behind us as we neared this atrocious tableau. The whole city seemed to fill with a well-nigh

instantaneous clamor, an ever-swelling hubbub, in which the dominant note was one of supreme, all-devastating terror.

I shall not speak of our feelings as officers and men. It was plain to us that the ultra-mundane factors in Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry had asserted themselves with a hideously accelerative ratio, following his latest resurrection. But, despite this, and the wholly stupendous enormity of the miscreation before us, we were still prepared to fulfil our duty and defend as best we could the helpless populace. I boast not of the heroism required: we were simple men, and should have done only that which we were visibly called upon to do.

We surrounded the monster, and would have assailed it immediately with our bills and tridents. But here an embarrassing difficulty disclosed itself: the creature before us had entwined itself so tortuously and inextricably with its prey, and the whole group was writhing and tossing so violently, that we could not use our weapons without grave danger of impaling or otherwise injuring our two fellow-citizens. At length, however, the strugglings and heavings grew less vehement, as the substance and lifeblood of the men were consumed; and the loathsome mass of devourer and devoured became gradually quiescent.

Now, if ever, was our opportunity; and I am sure we should all have rallied to the attack, useless and vain as it would certainly have been. But plainly the monster had grown weary of all such trifling and would no longer submit himself to the petty annoyance of human molestation. As we raised our weapons and made ready to strike, the thing drew back, still carrying its win-drawn, flaccid victims, and climbed upon the eichen-block. Here, before the eyes of all assembled, it began to swell in every part, in every member, as if it were inflating itself with a superhuman rancor and malignity. The rate at which the swelling progressed, and the proportions which the thing attained as it covered the block from sight and lapsed down on every side with undulating, innulating folds, would have been enough to daunt the heroes of remotest myth. The bloating of the main torso, I might add, was more lateral than vertical.

When the abnormality began to present dimensions that were beyond those of any creature of this world, and to bulge aggressively toward us with a slow, interminable stretching of boa-like arms, my valiant and redoubtable companions were scarcely to be censured for retreating. And even less can I blame the general population, who were now evacuating Commorion in torrential multitudes, with shrill cries and wailings. Their flight was no doubt accelerated by the vocal sounds, which, for the first

time during our observation, were being emitted by the monster. These sounds partook of the character of hissings more than anything else; but their volume was overpowering, their timbre was a torment and a nausea to the ear; and, worst of all, they were issuing not only from the diaphragmic mouth but from each of the various other oral openings or suckers which the horror had developed. Even I, Athammaus, drew back from those hissings and stood well beyond reach of the coiling serpentine fingers.

I am proud to say, however, that I lingered on the edge of the empty square for some time, with more than one backward and regretful glance. The thing that had been Knyghathin Zhaum was seemingly content with its triumph; and it brooded supine and mountainous above the vanquished eighon-block. Its myriad hissings sank to a slow, minor sibilation such as might issue from a family of somnolent pythons; and it made no overt attempt to assail or even approach me. But seeing at last that the professional problem which it offered was quite insoluble; and divining moreover that Commorion was by now entirely without a king, a judicial system, a constabulary or a people, I finally abandoned the doomed city and followed the others.



THE VESPERS SERVICE

by WILLIAM R. BAUER

In a way, you might almost call this a reprint, as it was set up in type and completely prepared for the never-to-appear Winter 1970/71 issue (No. 4) of *WEIRD TERROR TALES*. Actually, of course, it is a new story, and at the time it was originally planned, *The Vespers Service* would have constituted Mr. Bauer's debut. At any rate, re-reading it (as was necessary for an entire new-round) has confirmed my original opinion of it as a promising start for a new author of weird tales.

THE CHOIR LOFT WAS THICK with caked dust. In one corner lay the ruins of an organ and its pipes which had never been installed. A gaping square hole in the center of the floor marked the place where the stair well should have been; the stairs had never been built. The only access to the loft was an ancient gap-stepped ladder nailed to one wall of the small church.

The main part of the church was clean and well kept. Ten rows of roughhewn rail benches flanked each side of the center isle. To the front stood the altar, if such a name would be applied to the simple stained table which served that function. The area below the floor of the choir loft had

been divided and partitioned into two small rooms, one on each side of the short hallway that led from the door to the church proper. The doors to these two rooms were stout and locked with strong new padlocks. The door to the church, however, was left unlocked.

We had parked our car, in the mouth of an abandoned, weed choked lane which led into the woods which surrounded the church on three sides, laid some loose brush around it to keep it from being detected from the road and walked the mile to the churchyard.

After making sure no one was around to see us, we had entered and climbed to the loft. It had been about an hour before sundown, then. In the loft we had set up our simple equipment, two cassette tape recorders and a camera loaded with infra-red film, then settled down for the wait.

"This place gives me the creeps, and I don't mind saying so," Jim muttered. He reached into his shirt pocket and came out with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

I put my hand on his wrist to restrain him from lighting up. "Don't," I advised.

"Why not? The smoke'll clear before they get here. And I need something to help calm my nerves."

"Sure, the smoke will be gone. But how about the aroma? The wrong smell could give us away, too, you know. If you feel edgy eat one of those cancer sticks. It may not make you feel better, but it'll sure cure the butterflies."

"Very funny." But he did put the pack away and sit quietly for a while. Then he asked, "Mike, just what would happen if they did catch us here?"

"I really don't know. So far as I know, this will be the first time in this church's history that any outsider has even tried to witness one of their services. Look, if you want to bug out from here, go ahead. I can handle the recorders and the camera by myself."

He laughed. "And come out with plenty of worthless film that won't show a thing. You're no cameraman. I'll stick around and take the pictures. But this place does give me the creeps. If I was just driving down the road outside I'd say this place hadn't been used for a good fifty years. Most people keep their churches looking nice. This place has knee high grass all around it, and the paint is so cracked and peeled off the wood that I'm sure it hasn't been painted since the turn of the century. It's weird."

"These people are very secretive about their religion. You know that. They won't answer questions about it. They won't let outsiders attend their services. They won't even mention their beliefs in front of strangers. Which is why we're here. This religion seems to be found nowhere outside

this valley, if you believe the rumors that circulate through the rest of the county. I plan to write my doctorate thesis on folk religions and their followers, and this is my case history."

"Sure. Okay, I understood that before we left the university. But did you ever consider that we might be fooling with something that's best left alone? Did you notice that graveyard out back?"

I had seen it, of course. It was a small graveyard, surrounded and divided into two parts by a very old, very rusted wrought iron fence. An ornate gate gave entrance to each half of the divided cemetery, and to my quick observation it seemed that the left half of the graveyard was better cared for than the right. At least the left gate was still standing while the right gate was sagged in and held up by only one hinge. I told Jim all that I remembered about it.

"While you were looking around inside, before you called me, I took a closer look," he told me. "On the right side the newest grave is dated 1929. The stones are all weather worn, but in the other side, some of the newest stones are only a year or so old. And all the graves are those of young girls about sixteen. That worries me."

There was the rumble of a truck motor from outside that cut off our conversation. The people of the valley were starting to arrive for the evening service. Two men came inside. I leaned out as far as I safely could to look down at them. They were dressed in ordinary overalls and strong work shoes. One wore a tan hunting jacket. They unlocked the doors to the two small rooms and began to bring things out.

The man in the hunting jacket carried a large pile of red colored cloth back into the vestibule, then returned. Next they brought out a box that contained what looked like waxen balls which they carried to the wall. The other man walked along the wall, stopping at shallow brass bowls which were nailed to the wall at equal distances. He placed one ball into each of the bowls. The man in the hunting jacket placed waxen balls into the bowls on the other wall.

As they worked the two talked in low voices about the night chill that was setting in, about the late spring this year and the probable effect it would have on the crops, especially. Only a brief mention was made of the worship they had come to attend. This was, after they talked of possible bad crops, when one of them said, "Yep, this spring the sacrifice is more important than any other I can remember."

Their final labor was the carrying of a thick, worn book from its place of safekeeping to the lectern which stood to one side of the rude altar.

This they did in silent reverence and with a stately manner such as one might find in one of the world's great cathedrals. There could be no doubt that this book was their Holy of Holies.

Once this task was finished, the two again went outside to await the beginning of the service which I knew from the rumors I had learned would not start until at least half an hour after dark.

When they had started their work I had signalled to Jim to take a few pictures. Now, as I turned to him, he gave me the high sign and leaned close to whisper, "Got four shots. One real good one of the book when they held it up just before they set it on the stand. Telephoto lens. If there's anything on the cover you'll be able to read it easy with a blowup."

We leaned back to wait. More cars and trucks pulled in. The conversations of a small milling crowd reached us through the cracked walls, clear enough for us to pick out some words but too muffled to give us a clear idea of what they were talking about.

Fifteen minutes passed before the people outside began to be silent; it seemed as if a very important person had arrived, so suddenly did their voices hush.

Jim suddenly leaned over to me and asked, "If something goes wrong, is there an escape hatch?"

In answer I turned and pointed back and up to the old bell tower. "There's a step ladder nailed to the inside of the tower wall. I took a look up there when I first came inside to scout. The bell has no clapper, but the rope is still attached and it's strong enough. We could shimmy up the rope to the ladder rungs if we were forced to. But just keep your cool and we won't have to worry about escape hatches."

"Okay, Mike," he replied. "Just knowing there's a back door makes me feel better, even if it is kind of risky." Then we waited in silence again.

The people began to enter, now. Each was dressed in a red robe which mantled him from his neck to feet. These robes were covered with embroidery of silver threads as fine as a spider's web, in geometric and esoteric symbols which were strange and unknown to me, yet at the same time seemed terrifyingly familiar. One by one they entered the dark church and took their seats on the benches, the men on the benches to the right of the center aisle and the women and children to the left.

When they all were seated, the two men who had prepared the church walked with dim sputtering torches to light the waxen balls they had placed in the wall bowls. These balls took fire easily and soon the church was filled with heat and a very pale light cast by the burning balls. I had been letting my mind wander for it seemed that the heat and light in the

room were much like the heat and light of Earth in long gone eons before mankind was even dreamed of. And I shook off this feeling with much difficulty.

A tall, thin man, bald with a thick, well trimmed beard and small piercing eyes entered and walked down the center aisle to the lectern beside the altar where he turned and faced the congregation with his arms folded upon his chest. He wore a robe like those of the others save that his was black and the spiderweb tapestry which adorned it was of both silver and gold, although the patterns of this embroidery were very similar to that on the red robes. A few of the symbols on the priest's robe were astrological in nature.

I turned on the first cassette recorder while Jim rapidly snapped his pictures. All was business now, and there was no time for idle thoughts which led to dangerous conclusions.

The priest spoke. His voice was high-pitched, and cracked nervously at the high points of his message, and he did not gesture wildly as some preachers do. Rather he leaned gently with both hands upon the lectern all the while he spoke.

"Brothers and sisters, the winter has been hard and we need to pay more now than at any other time during the lives of most of you. The service and the ritual must be received with the highest return of grace by the High One, for unless He shall grace us with his full measure of blessing many crops shall fail in our valley and there will be hunger in every home next winter.

"I will not speak to you of your sins since the last vespers of winter service. You and I—we have all sinned. But these shall cause us no harm if we freely confess of them in our nightly prayers in our own homes. Fear not, sin not, and the High One will protect us and our homes and our valley from the unfaithful who live all around us and would destroy us—for they have fallen from the favor of the High One while we are still His blessed children.

"The great matter of keeping our worship and our belief secret only to ourselves has now become again a matter of high concern among us for I have received a letter from one of the heathen at a so-called center of higher learning who would come among us to fathom our secrets. Study us, he said in his letter. But we know what such study would bring; for this man is one of the forces of flame and evil which would crush our ancient beliefs and force us to follow the new upstart gods of the heathen, and even imprison us and torture us to death for daring to practice our ancient

and Truly Sacred religion in defiance of the egotistical decrees and laws of the false upstart gods. This intrusion, this 'study', we must not and shall not allow. Each must take a private oath to die himself rather than expose us all and lay our homes and our valley open to the persecution and the false beliefs of the heathen."

He paused, a master of drama, and let his eyes rove over the faces of his congregation. Each person on the benches must have felt that the priest had stared deep into his own eyes to reassure himself of their strength and their oath to their religion. Then he folded his arms on his chest and nodded his silent approval to the will of his followers.

After a moment he opened the great book to a place marked by a strip of black cloth, and he read. "Let us pay." All heads bowed as he continued.

"Oh, High One. Hear us, your children. Give us fair spring which is now so close to come. Give us good crops in abundance so that we might be strong and serve Thee throughout the next year. Find acceptable the bride whom we have chosen for Thee, we pray, and take her who is most pure and free from sin of all our maidens in the valley, and give us Your blessing." He paused then commanded. "Bring forth the Bride."

Two men escorted a young girl dressed in a white robe down the aisle. Her robe was of satin and embroidered with spidery designs even richer than those of the priest, her long black hair hung loose down her back and her dainty feet were bare. Slowly they moved. The girl's steps were faltering and she swayed gently from side to side as if she were asleep.

The priest laid her on the altar after he drew a five-pointed star on its center with a piece of chalk. As soon as she was lying on the table she became rigid and her eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. Then the truth came to me; she was drugged.

The old priest then drew a huge five-pointed star upon the floor, so that the table stood within the pentagram which formed its center. He stood and bent over the girl, whispering some words, probably a prayer, which no one could hear but her. His long-fingered hands parted the robe down the front, revealing soft flesh; the girl was nude under the white robe.

Something flashed silver in the dim light. The old man had drawn a long dagger from the folds of his robe. Jim struggled to suppress a gasp of horror. My stomach twisted with cold fear. But our fear was for little; he did not plunge the blade into the girl's breast as we had expected. Instead he carved a third pentagram star onto her stomach as near as possible to the center of her body, and he used only enough pressure to cut through the

girl's skin. The thin lines of blood showed a terrible crimson against the white of her flesh.

The old man returned to the lectern and rifled through the pages of his sacred book. I breathed a sigh of relief. This sacrifice was to be symbolic only, for as he turned from the altar the old priest had handed his knife to one of his assistants who carried the weapon to the storage room at the rear of the church.

"High One, hear us!" the old man cried hoarsely. His face was flushed and damp with sweat, his fingers jerked as he made his wild gestures. And we saw that now his congregation was tense with expectation and soaked with nervous sweat. The climax of the service was fast approaching and all were anticipating it eagerly. Two possibilities came to my mind: either a ritual rape or an orgy. Or possibly both. The thoughts nauseated me, but I was relieved that I would not watch wanton murder.

Words came from the old priest's mouth, words which froze my spine with fear for they were in a language I had never heard spoken before, which the old man apparently did not understand himself because he fumbled and gave the impression that he was mouthing sounds only, with a tongue not really meant to make them.

"Rrath aauthu ninokniv paluie pector filkes! Annavaal-Valyn. Annavaal-Valyn sarrh. Ers Cthulhu etern Yog-Sothoth etra Nik-enemh! Puthoranw fordanus Portelebus! Annavaal-Valyn sarrh!"

Those words entranced the congregation. Their eyes grew to small pinpoints which seemed to be lighted with electric glowing. My eyes began to play real tricks on me. I thought a small luminous cloud had begun to form above the drugged girl's body.

The congregation took up the final chant "*Annavaal-Valyn sarrh!*" repeating it over and over in frenzy.

I was not seeing things; the luminous cloud *did* form. With each echoing of the chant it became larger and more solid. Then it split into two smaller clouds which were connected by a thin translucent whisp of metallic blue smoke. The thing in the air became hard and bubble-like, inside which a liquid seemed to roll and slosh. It resembled an obscene mockery of a head and body; and finally, four tentacles slowly formed, hanging down, growing longer with each repetition of the chant, from the upper globe, the featureless face of the thing.

Jim punched me on the shoulder and shouted, "Mike! Let's get outta here. Leave the junk!" Then he turned and started to pull himself up hand-over-hand on the bell rope.

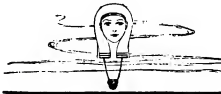
He was right of course, this was something best left to nightmares. But I was going to take the cassette cartridges with the service recorded on them. I worked clumsily and still watched the altar with a terrible fascination.

The creature-thing was solid now. One final shout "*Annavaal-Valyn sarth!*" echoed through the building. The thing's four acid-dripping tentacles swayed with the faint stir of air.

I snapped the morbid lure of the ritual of hell, tore the tape from the machine and stuffed it into my pocket as I went to the rope. Jim waiting on the roof called to me to hurry.

I had just started to climb to the ladder when the old priest called out his final invocation: "*Annavaal-Valyn sarth, erit farcas!*" Some terrible desire made me look back one last time, and that last look nearly cost me my sanity. Then I climbed to the small window beside the bell, leaped to the roof. I lost my balance, rolled down the roof and fell heavily to the ground. Vaguely, I remember Jim's supporting arm as I stumbled away from the house of hell.

Jim never learned what I saw. He would not have believed. Not really. I saw those four tentacles plunge into the girl. Three into the stomach where they branched out and one into the eyes—it formed twin mouths just before it plunged into those open, staring eyes. The thing convulsed as it drove something into the girl, and then sucked something back into itself. The entire tragedy took only a second. Then It dissolved back to where it belonged, leaving behind only bleached skin draped loosely over bones from which even marrow had been drawn.



THE ARTIST OF TAO

by ARTHUR STYRON

The story of Kito and the jealous Jewel of the Lotus is ARTHUR STYRON's sole appearance in *STRANGE TALES*; he had been seen on the contents page of *WEIRD TALES* twice in 1925 — and, I believe, was far better known in magazines outside of the fantasy-science fiction field.

IT WAS BITTERLY COLD. Kito, in his light garment of red Lhasa cloth, was shivering. His fingers, which he kept dipping in cold water lest the slightest warmth from them dissolve the half-frozen butter he was molding, were stiff and numb. He was tired, too. Since daybreak he had been working, without stopping even to eat, on the butter likeness of the Jewel of the Lotus, the patron goddess of the lamasery, that was to be used in tonight's ceremonial feast in her honor.

The chanting-hall where he worked was almost in darkness. Through the numerous red-lacquered pillars the gilded image of the God of Learning glowed dully. The high ceiling, covered with ceremonial umbrellas that swayed with ghostly quietness in the cold draft, oppressed

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him with its mysterious imminence. A sudden flash of the sun, that died away slowly like the last spurt of flame from a burnt-out log, reminded the young artist that the light of day was almost spent.

He sighed and reluctantly dried his frozen fingers on his red gown. It would be better not to work any longer; in the obscurity he might destroy the delicate likeness. The panel, though, had been actually finished for some time. Kito had continued working on it because he was loath to surrender the image until the last minute, adding a bit of color here and there, breathing the likeness into life. The young lama smiled to himself in the semi-darkness. All would exclaim when they gazed at the panel how

beautiful was the Jewel of the Lotus; but Kito alone would know that it was not at the goddess's likeness they were gazing with so great admiration and awe, but at the image of the young forest girl he had seen down by the river...

He rose from his bench and went to the tall window where he stood, slender and still, gazing down from the ridgy eminence of the lamasery terrace with dark, brooding eyes. The valley, shimmering with golden lights against a black sunset, stretched before him. Kito loved the wild forest with its precious woods and ferocious animals and profound essence. Even now, when winter had bared its gnarled poplars, and stripped the thinly laid bark from its birches, and driven its animals mad with hunger, Kito knew the fragrance and melodiousness and wild beauty of the forest... There, beyond the trees, lay the river like a yellow snake asleep, its cascades in the distance like gleaming scales.

At this crepuscular hour the women would be carrying water in their buckets up to the village of Tao, between the river and the lamasery. Perhaps *she* would be there, his slim-limbed forest girl of the translucent skin. He could still see her as he had seen her down there by the river, in her peasant garment of a single sheep-skin with one shoulder and breast bare. She was not more than sixteen, but strong and sturdy, a beautiful bud that would open with the warm breath of desire. She had smiled at him, her white teeth flashing, her dark skin showing the rose of health beneath, her eyes, under their black lashes, like purple wine.

He had smiled back then, too timid to speak to her. Then she had sped away like a mountain goat, her dark hair flying in the wind, leaving behind her a vividness like that of the sun on the burnished neck and brilliant plumes of a gorgeous bird; or of the changing colors of a living prismatic gem.

He had not seen her again. The next day Wung-Ko, the Grand Lama, had ordered him to begin work on the panel of the Jewel of the Lotus, the largest and most important of all the butter panels for the feast: work that had kept Kito all day for a month in the cold, dark chanting-hall. But he had kept the forest girl's memory by molding her likeness instead of the goddess's in the butter panel. And yet, the apostasy had not been altogether intentional, for his eyes, having rested with desire on the forest girl, henceforth saw only her face in the mass of stiff butter where even the jealous Jewel's likeness was obliterated.

There was a sudden rustling at the door and a flash of bright light as someone pushed through the heavy silk curtain. "What, Kito, dallying? Do

you not know that the hour of the feast draws near?" It was Wung-Ko, the Grand Lama, speaking in his deep, bass voice.

"The panel is finished, my father," said Kito. He came from the window back to his butter panel.

Wung-Ko raised the lamp he was carrying and gazed intently at the image. The four delicate hands, the small feet, set like the petals of a clover leaf, the large, pointed ears, were surely those of the Jewel of the Lotus. But that thin, oval face, with its peach-bloom, its upturned, mocking mouth, and great, lustrous eyes, could only be that of a beautiful, sensual creature.

"It is very beautiful," said Wung-Ko finally, lowering the butter lamp, "but were it a likeness of the goddess it would be more useful." His voice was smooth and silky, but there was in it a profound knowledge of the ways of men.

"Must art then be useful, my father?" asked Kito eagerly.

"That," said the Grand Lama, "is its function. There are those of the faithful who would believe that this image is the Jewel herself."

Kito made a gesture of anger. "But it is merely the work of my hands! There is no breath in it!"

"You weary yourself with the vanity of words," said Wung-Ko loftily. "Does your limited intelligence rise above the phenomenon of the God of Learning?" He motioned towards the gilded idol that shone malignantly in the far end of the hall.

"What profits the graven image that the maker hath graven it?" muttered the young artist. Yet, despite his stubbornness he was puzzled and frightened.

"There is much in what you say," said Wung-Ko softly, "—much heresy." He was gazing intently at Kito. There was something in the boy's wide-set, brooding eyes—a sad yearning to clothe all nature with the attributes of an artistic soul, that would allure many women—women puzzled to know whether it was the soul or the body they were seeking. Ah, such a fascination was not for a lama, a celibate destined to serve spiritually one woman, the Jewel of the Lotus... Wung-Ko suddenly moved towards the door. "I shall send those who will remove this likeness not of the Jewel," he said.

Kito stood quite still staring at the swaying curtains that had fallen behind the Grand Lama. Had he offended Wung-Ko's religious sensibilities? Or worse still, had he sinned against the gods themselves? The punishment for heresy was so cruel and severe that the lamas discussed it in whispers: not only was it the penalties of men, but the more subtle and

pitiless vengeance of the gods. Poor Kito, who had merely glimpsed intellectual emancipation, could only shudder. He almost ran after Wung-Ko from the dark chanting-hall.

On the terrace all was confusion. Lights were flashing everywhere. Some of the lamas were running about talking excitedly, while others were raising colorful banners, or fastening butter panels to wooden frames so they could be hoisted on high posts. People were already beginning to assemble in the courtyard below the terrace. The young man's heart gave a quick beat. Perhaps the forest girl would be here! If she came he would speak to her; would tell her that at last he was free to meet her on the morrow by the river!

Hurrying by the yamen, the Grand Lama's residence, and the House of Recompense of Kindness, Kito entered the Temple. It was his task to fill every evening the butter lamps and water bowls before the great gilded clay Buddha and the numerous brass images.

As he worked he thought of her, the forest girl. Soon it would be Spring, when, on account of the heat, it would not be possible to make butter images. The courtyard would be gay with peonies and lilacs; the forest he loved would be green and glad, and the mountains soft and blue and friendly. Together, he and the forest girl would walk beside the yellow river. He would tell her that he only wore the red dress; that in his heart he was not a lama but a man, though little older than herself, to whom life meant love. He would tell her how he had never wanted to be a lama: his parents having brought him to the lamasery when he was a child.

Growing up without the strong physique needed for more arduous work, or without a heavy, virile voice for the chanting, he had been given the most obscure of occupations in the lamasery—molding butter panels for the feasts. Yet, he had been content withal until he had seen the forest girl; then everything was changed. Now that his eyes were only for her, it seemed that through them all else was different: the lamasery draught and monotonous, the lamas dull and ignorant, and the gods themselves petty and exacting.

What if he did adjure his vows? He would only follow the example of other lamas—some said, of Wung-Ko himself—who, if they were celibates, were also men, men of the soil, very human; although they were careful to teach the people that their priestly commission was inherent and not dependent on their private virtues. The forest girl, too, was of the soil, the rich earth whence spring the rarest flowers which even in their full beauty are dependent on the soil for life: so that she would understand when he clasped her in his arms to mingle her flowery breath with his...

"Is, then, your breath so sweet that the gods welcome it?"

Kito started violently and dropped the water bowl he was cleaning, the clash reverberating through the stillness of the temple with terrifying distinctness. The voice was hardly more than a whisper, yet sweet and clear. He had been so engrossed with his thoughts that he had not heard anyone enter the Temple. He peered about the great room whose walls and ceilings were almost hidden with multi-colored flags and gorgeously colored strips of silk. "Who is it?" he called shrilly.

There was no answer.

The young artist's hands began to tremble violently. Even though the images could not speak, still there were the spirits of the righteous which must come to the Temple to worship the gods. The old lamas sometimes related awesomely how as neophytes they had heard Voices in the Temple when they had thoughtlessly offended the gods. Kito passed a shaking hand over his damp brow. What had he done? Ah!—his *breath*!

A terrible chill of fear began to steal slowly up his spine. He had forgotten the ritual of putting a cloth over his mouth to keep from defiling the images! He wiped his damp forehead with the sleeve of his gown and glanced about fearfully. In the darkness of the Temple the flickering of the butter lamp was like the darting anger from a god's eye. Surely, though, formalities were nothing to the gods—they to whom all earthly acts were mere accidents, and to whom love was a Person!

Kito staggered to his feet. He had worked enough for tonight. On his way out, he stopped before the great brazier that glowed in the center of the Temple to drop some lumps of perfumed charcoal on the fire as a votive offering. Was it imagination, or did he hear—seemingly coming from the left of the golden altar dosed with heavy yellow silk, where was the shrine of the Jewel of the Lotus—a soft, laughing sound, such as the north wind makes in the Fall when it comes to begin its cruel work of destruction?

In the refectory an elderly lama remarked to the young artist that he seemed pale and tired. Kito did not reply. He scarcely touched his supper of butter, tea, and barley-flour, and, rising, made his way to the courtyard. The huge butter panels were now in place, set in wooden frames hung on their strong, lofty posts. Butter lamps, ranged on shelves before the images, illumined them with a brilliant, white light. The bright colors of the panels made a glowing splash against the night sky.

The lamas guarding the crowds were having difficulty in keeping the undisciplined people out of that part of the courtyard reserved for the

panels, the lamas, the notables, and the ceremonies. Armed with heavy sticks, they were beating the trespassers unmercifully.

Kito ran over to the edge of the enclosure. "Why beat them for their zeal?" he cried indignantly to one of the guards.

The big lama rested his arm. "Discipline must be maintained, oh artist."

"They know no discipline," said Kito warmly, "they who are simple children of the grasslands."

"Like the goats," said the guard laughingly. Nevertheless, he goodnaturedly desisted in the punishment.

It was then that Kito caught a glimpse of the forest-girl near the edge of the surging, giggling, shrieking crowd. Her starry eyes were fixed upon the young artist with a look half sensual, half adoring. The blood rushed through Kito's body in quick surges. For an instant his timidity was gone, consumed in the elemental exaltation that gripped him. "Tomorrow at sunrise?" he murmured. The girl nodded, her eyes very bright. No one else had understood.

In a daze, Kito made his way back to join the red-robed lamas who sat in long rows before the butter panels. The singers were beginning to chant in deep voices to the accompaniment of drums. The great feast had commenced! Sitting quietly in his place, Kito raised his eyes, so full of the forest girl's sensual loveliness, to the brightly illumined butter panel in which her image had supplanted that of the Jewel.

"Ah!" He clutched at his red gown, and his eyes dilated with horror. Something frightful had happened! That frowning brow, that small pinched mouth—they were not the features of the forest girl but of the Jewel herself! Was it the weird effect of the butter lamps or of his fevered imagination, or were the eyes of the goddess fixed upon him with cruel malevolence? A sharp cry of fear escaped from his wide-open mouth.

There was a terrific blast from the numerous trumpets on the roof of the Temple. The notables were arriving: first the Prince, gorgeous in his heavy silks, and then the Living Buddha, swaddled in stiffly embroidered vestments. Both in turn kotowed low to the butter panels, and took their places on a dais in a reserved place. The lamas rose and kotowed, and sitting down again, resumed their chant which gradually became louder and more sonorous.

Kito, his thin face white with terror, sat huddled over, staring at the ground, not daring to lift his eyes to the transformed face on his panel. There were renewed blasts from the trumpets, and the dancers, hideous in their colored masks, entered the courtyard and began to gyrate with uncouth abandon. Something in their ugly masks stirred a faint hope in

the young artist's breast: perhaps the lamas, angry because the Jewel's likeness was not in the panel, had themselves changed the face!

Kito raised his eyes eagerly, and slowly they distended with horror as he gazed at the image. The face was no longer that of the goddess, *but that of the forest girl as he had carved it!* He sank forward with a moan. Now he was certain that the Jewel was angry. Oh, what would she do now to punish the profane eyes which he had let wander from her sacred beauty to sensual worship?

He was aroused by a strong grip on his shoulder. "Arise, little artist," said Wung-Ko's deep voice. "A great honor has befallen you. As a reward for beautifying her on the panel, the Jewel of the Lotus has been pleased to elect you as presiding lama of the great feast."

Kito's body grew suddenly rigid. "But I cannot!" he cried passionately. Surely the Jewel had some ulterior design: she could not mean to honor him thus, in view of his apostasy! "I—I am not worthy," he stammered.

"Who are you to contest the will of the Jewel?" demanded Wung-Ko sternly. "Lots were cast, and she had elected you. Add not to your heresy, and follow me."

The authority of the lots—the oracle through which the gods voiced their desires—was infallible and final. The shivering young artist had no recourse but to obey. He rose to his feet, his legs trembling so that he could scarcely stand, and followed Wung-Ko across the courtyard. He strained his eyes to get a glimpse of the forest girl, as if desperately seeking something real—an image of her, truer than the delusion he had created in butter—to take with him he knew not where...

At the far end of the courtyard Wung-Ko stopped and briefly explained to the half-dazed boy the duties of the presiding lama. They were simply to build a fire and, at the proper time, to produce an explosion wherein the evil spirits should be exorcised. There was no danger if the presiding lama was nimble—and, of course, if the gods were favorable to him and protected him from the enraged evil spirits, as they must certainly be towards one whom they selected by the sacred lots.

Under the Grand Lama's directions Kito built in the courtyard a small fireplace of stones, and lit a fire of dried chips. On top of the fire was placed a great copper kettle filled with vegetable oil.

The chanting of the lamas grew in volume and passion as the fire gained in intensity. The mob moved and sighed in unison. Above the weird, strained noise the Grand Lama's voice was heard raised in prayer, coercing evil demons into a bit of triangular paper he held in his hand. His heavy

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TALES FROM CORNWALL

by David H. Keller, M.D.

(author of *The Abyss*, *Hereditary*, etc.)

10

THE KEY TO CORNWALL

Although this present tale starts out with Cecil, Overlord of Cornwall, the Cecil series really ended with *Feminine Magic*; the Overlord here makes his farewell and the series takes a different turn. Those who did not care for the whimsy of the Cecil episodes ought to find the present chapter more to their taste; but I trust that those who enjoyed the Cecil tales will appreciate this episode, which is closer to the sort of weird tale one expected from the author.

CECIL, OVERLORD OF CORNWALL, sat dreaming before the fire. Even in his prime, he had never been a large man and now premature age had shrunk him till only his eyes held the fire of youth that had once been his. On the other side of the fire sat his only child, Eric the Golden, who for some years had carried the burdens of Cornwall and thus learned the duties of Overlord against the day when his father should die.

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"Have you ceased writing your history, Father?" asked the young man. "Years past you spent much time in the library; but latterly, when I visited you there, you were often asleep."

"The record of my life does not seem as important now as I once thought it," Cecil replied. "Time was when it seemed necessary to leave a full documentation to the Hubelaires who will follow me. But after the death of your Mother it seemed I lost interest. There are a few blank pages remaining in the volume, which, perhaps, some bookishly minded descendant of mine may fill; but I will write no more. At the back of this book is a chart on parchment showing where Hubelaire treasures are buried in our castle. For one reason or another or for no reason I have never sought them. You should remember they are there and locate the treasures or pass the secret on to your son."

The men were waiting for the wise physician to announce the birth of Eric's child, who in turn, if a son, would some day rule over the land. Cecil had found this country of Cornwall a land of starved simple folk, horrific monsters, still more terrible giants and bands of marauding robbers. His wisdom, more than his strength of arms, had wiped out evil until Cornwall was now a pleasant place to live. On reaching manhood his son, Eric the Golden, had married Black Breda, Princess of Wales. It was an odd marriage, the man a flaxen-haired giant and the woman tiny, black-haired, with great love in her heart and the laughter of pixies in her soul. Now she was in labor, a cause of anxiety to her husband and father-in-law.

The Overlord stroked the golden key which hung pendant to a thick silken cord round his neck, and looked lovingly at his son.

"I am uneasy about this matter of Breda and her child," he said. "Long years ago I came to this land from Armorica and, helped by a mighty magician, won victory over the Toad Men. My friend in this struggle between light and darkness made me Overlord of Cornwall and gave me this key. On it are graven words of a race long dead, so none now can read it, but the meaning of those words is simply this:

They who hold the Golden Key

Shall ever Lords of Cornwall be.

"Thus far the prophecy on the key has been correct. In one way or another I have held the land for you and for those who will come after you. We are at peace with those around us. For many years we have held our borders against those who live by the sword. Our nobles rule wisely and our common folk are content. All have clothes on their backs, fire in their huts and meat in their kettles.

"But last night I had a dream. Mayhaps it was only a false foreboding

of evil, caused by my over-anxiety concerning your lady and her travail, but it seemed to me that at least one of the Toad Men is still alive to do harm to me and mine. My friend with the club feet, who, as priest, married me and your mother Leonora, thought that one was still alive but considered him harmless. Still, it may be that evil never dies. You have heard me speak of this key before, but keep in mind the ancient words. Tell your son about them and have him tell his son. As long as we hold the key, we hold Cornwall; once it is taken from us, our land sinks back to the barbarism in which I found it."

He would have said more, but was interrupted by the old physician, who walked to a place before the fire and stood rubbing his withered hands. At last he turned to Eric and, as though answering a question, said: "Your lady will live, Prince Eric, but she will bear you no more children."

The golden-haired giant sprang toward him and, shaking him roughly by the shoulders, cried: "What of the child? Is it a boy? Will he live?"

Lord Cecil leaned forward, hand gripping the arms of his ivory chair. The physician laughed mockingly. "'Tis a boy and he will live, though when you see him you will think it better had he died. Through him the Brethren of the Toad Men who died untimely that night when Cecil the pauper helped the Devil kill us are revenged."

The Overlord of Cornwall stood up. "Age made me lose my cunning and caution," he muttered grimly. Turning sharply to his son he cried: "Hands off the man, Eric. Nothing must happen to you."

With slow but certain step he moved toward the old physician. For that ancient there was no retreat save into the fire. Then they met, grappled, swayed and fell floorward, the Overlord underneath. The physician had one arm around Cecil's body and one hand on his throat, but Cecil seemed content to have both arms locked behind the other's neck. Eric tore a dagger from his belt and was bending to plunge it into the Toad Man when his wrist was caught in a grip that held him powerless. Turning, he saw a dark stranger who smiled and whispered: "Do not interfere. Your sire is a proud man and I know that he has wisdom to use the only manner by which he can win. He would not want either of us to interfere with his dispensing of justice. He is a true Hubelaire!"

Slowly and surely Cecil brought his face to the face of his adversary; carefully he fastened to him, mouth to mouth, and tightly he held him, sucking the breath of life from his body. The physician twisted above him, strove to rise, to shake off his executioner, but slowly relaxed and at last, with a few tortured jerks, died. And as death came his body changed, almost instantaneously, into that of a giant toad, clad in human garments,

but nonetheless a toad and very dead at that. The stranger separated the living from the dead, threw the toad into the flames and then knelt beside the Overlord of Cornwall.

"I should have come long before, my dear friend," he said, his voice husky with emotion, "but I was busy with serious duties in Tartary and only today did I realize your danger. So I came on the wings of light, barely in time to help you but not in time to save the boy. Now he is as he is and no one can make him different. But his father can hold the key, and after him mayhap, the boy can be made somewhat of. I am not all-wise, but I know there is still one of the race of the Toad Men left. Where that one is or in what shape I know not, but never will the House of Hubelaire be safe till this last one is destroyed. You have been badly hurt; methinks the poison breathed from that spawn of Hell will spell your doom. But all brave men pass sometime and you can be comforted in knowing that you pass bravely. I will escort your spirit to Gobi, where you will spend an eternity as you will, and no doubt that will be in a library."

Thus Cecil, first Overlord of Cornwall, passed and Eric the Golden became custodian of the Golden Key and ruled over the land in his father's stead. Messengers carried the broken bow and the flaming torch throughout the country and by the third day many nobles from near and far came to do the dead man homage. Even the Queen of Ireland drove stately in her golden chariot, and in silver chariots behind her sat three blind harpers who sang new songs in praise of the dead Overlord. But the simple folk sat unconsolated in their huts, wondering what now would happen to them.

It was not till after the funeral-guests had departed and the stranger had returned to Gobi that Eric had time to visit his wife and son. He had asked often about them and was always assured that they were doing well. Now, with the castle empty of visitors he went to the river and bathed till much of his grief and deep sorrow was washed from him in the snow water from the mountains. Then he dressed in his brave court suit and, humming a little song, walked back to the castle and to the room where his wife and child lay.

At the bed of Breda the Black, he dropped to his knees. It was a high bed, but he was a tall man and even with knees to the floor he could overlook his wife. He took her hand in his and knew, without asking, that Death had placed his cross on her forehead. She smiled.

"I am glad to see you, Eric, my first and last love, and it sorrows me that I will not be a long time with you. It seems to me that I am dying

from nothing in particular save the lack of desire to live. My ladies tell me that I am now the Queen of the Overlord and mother of a new prince, but I saw the boy, just for a moment, though my ladies tried to keep me from doing so; and, knowing how you would feel, I have no desire to live. Speed me with your lips and burn candles for the peace of my soul."

Thus Eric the Golden lost two of the dear ones of his life. But he rose bravely from the side of his dead wife, saying in muted voice: "I have a son and must live on for him and his future greatness. Someday he will carry the Golden Key."

He told the ladies-in-waiting to lead him to the child. Fearful, they escorted him to the nursery, where the withered husk of an old nurse sat at the foot of a cradle inlaid with gold, ebony and ivory, a present from the Emperor of the Spice Isles, in which Eric had been rocked years before. The father looked down on his son. The ladies faded from the room. Only the old dame stayed, rubbing her cold fingers.

"The boy has a large head," observed Eric. "He should be wise as a man."

"His head is large and shapely," muttered the nurse.

"There is a good jaw there. When he fastens on an opinion he will hold it. He has a strong neck and will hold his head high as he travels through life."

"His jaw is firm and his neck strong," answered the nurse, though she had no need to.

Eric whirled around, took her by the shoulder and shook her. "What is wrong with the lad?" he demanded. "What is wrong with him?"

She made no reply, but sat with head down, sobbing.

With great, strong, shaking but tender hands, Eric took off the baby clothes and then, white-faced and silent, replaced them and still wordless left the room. In the hall the ladies stood rigid against the walls as though waiting to be struck. He paused, looking from one to one. "Tend to the lad carefully and see that he is fed on Goat's milk," he said. "I go to bury his mother, and when that is done I will come back and provide for my son."

On the morning of the third day he dressed in leather hunting clothes, took the child from the nursery and rode away without escort into the dark forest. The babe slept, but by noon cried lustily for want of food. Just then a woman walked from the greenwood and paused in front of Eric's horse. He, looking down on her, saw that she was young, deep-bosomed, flaxen-haired and in all respects comely.

"Who are you? Why do you stop me? What can I do for you?" he asked kindly.

"I am Freda, wife of Olaf the Dane and mother of his child. Our war vessel, *The Swan*, wrecked on your rocks two suns ago and I was the only one to reach shore. I found a hut and slept. Last night, in a dream, I saw you coming with a babe who hungers for a mother, as I hunger for my dead child."

Wordless, Eric handed her the baby. Wordless, the woman seated herself on the grass, opened her kirtle and nursed the little one. Eric, from his saddle, looked down on them and wondered if here was not a gift of God, sent to aid him in his sore distress. Finally the babe slept. The woman cradled him in her arms and said quietly, "The child has a lovely face."

Eric looked at the woman and babe without answer.

"A strong chin and a powerful neck," she continued. "With proper care he will become a fine man."

"Hand me the little one," commanded the Overlord of Cornwall, "and do you seat yourself behind me on the horse. The boy is yours to care for. I will take you to my hunting lodge, where there will be servants to wait on you and men-at-arms to protect you, for this baby, if he lives, will some day be Lord over all Cornwall. You are a good woman and thus you will have a home and safety. Your care of the child will be rewarded, if a woman can be paid for such kindness to a child."

As time passed Eric found work to busy him. His father had cleaned Cornwall, but now the son put a polish on the land till it was a country anyone would be proud to live in. One day a month he rode to visit his son, and the rest of the time he tried to forget him, which was very difficult. When the boy was three years old Eric called to the castle an old forester who had a flair for training dogs.

"From now on, Russell, you will train a prince instead of wolf-hounds. My son has a strong jaw. He must be taught to use it. He must learn to hang to a rope and never let go until he desires. Teach him how to use his body correctly, to arch his neck and how to move about. Every day rub his body with oil. I will have a wise man teach him in the use of words, and after that in all wisdom. He can learn to write. When he is six we will put him on a pony with special harness and saddle. By the use of a cunningly devised bridle he can learn to guide the pony, and, as he grows older, he will ride a horse. Do you know about the lad?"

"I have heard talk about him but paid little heed of it. It seemed to me that things could not be as bad as 'twas said."

"It is as bad or worse. But the boy has a fine brain and talks very well for his age; so far he does not realize—he has seen no other children—he does not know."

"Someday," said the forester boldly, "he will know, and then he will not thank you for keeping him alive."

"Who am I to kill my own son?" Eric replied. "All of us have something wrong with us, with our minds or bodies. The boy is not to blame—no one is, save the old physician who was slain too late by my father. Let the future tell the story! The lad has a strong jaw and a fine mind. These must carry him where he will go. It is for us to help him make the most of what he has. Do as I told you and remember you have in your keeping the next Overlord of Cornwall."

From that time a new life began for Balder, for thus he was named, that naming having been the desire of Breda the Black while she was carrying him. Eric pondered over the irony of such a name, and thought it should be changed, but wished not to depart from the desires of his dead love. Balder the Beautiful, the beloved, perfect god of the Northlands. What a name for such a child!

The boy learned to hold things in his mouth, death-gripped. He learned to ride the pony, guiding him with his jaw. Freda cared for him. Russell trained his body and a very wise old man taught him wisdom. By the time he was twelve he had learned all the ancient could teach him and could gallop on a war horse. Eric knew the time had come to bring him home to the castle and begin teaching him the duties of Overlord, which he would have to assume some day. His body grew large and strong and he could do what any other fine boy could have done with a similar body—just that and nothing more. But, because he had to depend on it, his mentality had developed far beyond his age.

An artificer in leather made him a harness so he could sit beside his father in the banquet hall. There, except that he had to be fed, he seemed to be like any other young prince, and, as those around him were accustomed to his care and had a great love for him, they never mentioned the tragic difference between him and other young men. He was mostly happy, appearing to enjoy life, as is the due of youth.

On his twenty-first birthday he was sitting in the library reading a manuscript which held him thrilled. A little dark man joined him and asked, "What are you reading, my dear Balder, which seems to make you smile and frown as you turn the pages?"

"This," the young man replied, "is the history of my grandfather,

Cecil, First Overlord of Cornwall. I smile as I read of his very remarkable life and I frown when I realize that there are some unwritten pages at the end of the book, and on them should be placed the tale of his later years."

"You can write. Why not finish the history?"

"What benefits me if I can write, if I know not what happened? All I know is that I am his grandson; how he spent his late years or how he died I know not of, for none has ever told me the story."

"I will tell you about those days," the little man said, "and as I talk you can write the part of my narrative you deem of import. Then we will come to the end of the tale and the finishing of the last page. Your grandsire was one of the great Hubelaires and was my good friend. Now this is what happened—" and he told Balder all concerning the last days of Cecil. As he wrote, Balder thrilled at the tale of the ending of his grandsire. Finally on the bottom of the last page, he wrote "The End" and, looking up to thank the narrator, was astonished to find him gone from the library. He closed the book just as his father entered the room.

"This is your birthday, Balder, and it is time for you to wed," Eric told him. "The times are troublesome, and more and more it becomes difficult for us to keep peace and preserve the land in its Golden Age. Marriage with a princess of a neighboring land, Wales, Scotia or Ireland, would help; and mayhaps your son would rule in peace and security. I think that it could be arranged."

Balder smiled sadly. "It would be better for you to marry again and raise a son," he replied. "Mayhaps some princess, bookish-minded, would marry me for what I have above my neck, but what lovely lady would want me for the part below?"

"You have a strong neck, Balder, a powerful jaw and a fine mind," said the Overlord. "The time may come when such attributes will take a man far in this troubled world. In the future a man may rule by such qualities rather than because he can fight and overcome by brute strength. Your grandsire was not much of a warrior, but he had a clever mind. Had he lived he would have gloried in your knowledge of the books in his library. It would be wise for me to look around and see if a suitable marriage can be arranged for you."

This was not easily accomplished. In all the lands near Cornwall men were still settling disputes with the pole-ax and broadsword. All the kings were kind and sympathetic, and when Eric looked them in the eye, made no reference to the peculiar disability of Prince Balder, but for this and that and the other reason found that a marriage between him and one of their daughters could not be arranged. Then, just as Eric decided that his

undertaking was impossible, messengers came from a land far away, offering the hand of a princess in marriage, a beautiful lady who would bring a dower of great wealth. They brought presents and a picture of the lady, and quietly said that she knew about Prince Balder but that made no difference. Eric sent gifts in return and before the year came to an end the princess arrived and with great pageantry was married to Prince Balder.

That afternoon the Overlord visited his son. "As I told you, these are troubled times," he said. "The King of Wales has sent me messengers saying enemies from the north have come in long ships and are harassing his shores. He pleads for help. Since I am compelled to leave Cornwall, you must rule in my place against my return. So, around your neck, I place this cord of twisted silk from which hangs the Golden Key. Guard it well and remember the ancient verse:

They who hold the Golden Key
Shall ever Lords of Cornwall be.

"When the enemy is driven back, or better still, destroyed, I shall return. Meanwhile, I regret the necessity of leaving you at this time when you should have nothing between you and your bride save thoughts of love-a-daisies."

"Go without fear, Father, and return when the time comes," Balder replied. "And while you are gone nothing shall happen to the Key. My bride, Marylyn, will help me in all things because she seems as wise as she is beautiful."

Thus Eric rode away, followed by his men-at-arms, archers and pike-men, and, after their leaving, the drawbridge was raised. But Freda, the nurse and Russell, the forester were fretted, and talked long into the night about their beloved Prince and his ascent into manhood and the responsibilities so suddenly thrust upon him.

Princess Marylyn went to the bedroom of her husband and, closing the door, locked it while Balder lay on the bed and feasted his eyes on her beauty—but not for long.

"I am puzzled that such a beautiful lady as you could deliberately mate with such a man as I," he said sadly.

"I married you because I wanted to," she replied, laughing.

"But why should you want to?" he asked.

"Because of that key you wear around your neck. Many years ago a Prince of Darkness, aided by your grandsire, destroyed the Toad Men who, for some centuries, had lived in the castle of the Hubelaires. Only one escaped, my father. The day you were born, Cecil the Overlord killed him

in a most horrible and pitiless manner. I am the last of my race. Through my legerdemain I arranged this marriage, and it was not hard to do. Your father, though he can fight, is nothing but a good-natured fool above the neck. The message from Wales was just one phase of my plan, as your father will find only when it is too late. My spirit-men surround the castle. Late tonight, after I am rested, I will place a candle in the window. Then the silken cord will be around my neck and the Golden Key will lie between my breasts. When my spirit-men see the flame of the candle they will swarm into the castle and kill everyone. Then they will overrun this land, slaying all, rich and poor, and once again we shall rule in Cornwall. The Prince of Darkness and your father will learn all this, but too late." She laughed merrily and ended, "That is why I married you, you poor dolt!"

Taking him in her lovely arms she raised him from the bridal bed and rolled him over on the floor. Then she took off her bridal dress and silver shoes and Balder knew that she spoke the truth, because her toes were long and webbed, like those of a toad. Savagely she tore the silk cord from his neck and hung it around her own white throat. Setting a lighted candle on the chest at the foot of the bed, she lay down to rest and was soon asleep, for she had nothing to fear—nothing to fear from such a bridegroom.

Balder, the far from beautiful—save that of him above the neck—lay helpless on the floor. He thought of Cornwall, the land of the Hubelaires, where peace had reigned for so many years; and he knew that he, and he alone, stood between the simple, happy folk and a terrible death. Because there was nothing to say he said nothing. He simply waited, realizing that though he had lost the key, none of the spirit-men would know it until the candle stood in the window.

There was naught for him to do save wait. His bride, the so beautiful Marylyn, with the body and arms of a Venus and the feet of a batrachian, lay drowning on the bed. At last, she slept, one fair arm slid over the side of the bed and rested, hand on floor. Then Balder knew that fate had delivered her into his power. Very carefully he rolled his body over, and then over once again, a trick he had learned on the meadow-grass. Now his face was but a few inches from the Toad Woman's wrist. He arched his neck, that strong bull-like neck, and opened his mouth. Suddenly he grasped that wrist and fastened on it with jaws that for years, once fastened, had never willingly let go.

The Toad Woman screamed from pain.

Jerking, he pulled her off the bed.

She beat him with her free hand, but he only held her the tighter, shaking her arm as a terrier shakes a rat. Her blood covered his face but he held her with ever more firmly clenched jaws. She dragged him across the floor, trying to reach the candle with her free hand and set it in the window. Once and again she almost touched it, but each time, with a powerful, convulsive movement, he pulled her back to the floor. Each was blood-spattered from her torn wrist. As the conflict continued she grew weaker and with a moan of exhaustion and frustration, she lay quiet and Balder knew that she had lost consciousness. He had been waiting, hoping that this would happen. Unlocking his jaws he jerked upward and secured a new hold on her upper arm. She woke only to scream and faint again. Now, exerting all his strength, he reached her neck and clamped his jaws on it, just below her chin. Almost losing consciousness himself, he thought dimly: "All I have to do now is to hold fast."

Tighter and tighter he held her. Closer and closer his teeth clamped on that lovely white column; at last he knew that he lay fastened to a corpse. He opened his jaws, worked his mouth down the silken cord, now covered with blood, and finally came to the Golden Key. He closed on that with his mouth and, satisfied with the knowledge that his land was safe, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Freda the nurse, tortured by unnamable fears, persuaded Russell the forester to take men-at-arms and break open the door of the bride chamber. There on the floor lay a giant toad, one foreleg torn and broken and the neck horribly mutilated, the body already swollen with putrefaction. Beside the dead toad lay Prince Balder, his face and body red with dried blood. For a moment all stood in amazement at what they saw. Then Russell bent over Balder, touched him gently, waking him.

"Cornwall is safe!" Balder said with a smile and went to sleep.

Freda fastened the Key around his neck with her apronstring, and Russell picked him up and carried him to his room, where they washed and nursed him. In due time he was able to tell the full story of that night battle. Later, Freda retold it to Eric, Overlord of Cornwall, who had returned in haste, suspecting treachery, when he found Wales at peace.

Eric listened patiently till the ending of the tale.

"My son did very well," he said proudly. "Considering that he has neither arms nor legs to fight with, he did very well."

"He has a strong jaw," said Freda the nurse.

THE ARTIST OF TAO

(Continued from page 59)

voice trembled with emotion as he pronounced the doom of heretics and unbelieving monks. Kito was numb with fright when an old lama brought a piece of yellow silk and proceeded to wind it on his right hand. The Grand Lama fixed the paper, into which he had coerced the demons, upon a long, forked stick. All the lamas except Kito stepped back from the fire.

The next instant the vegetable oil in the kettle boiled over and caught fire. As if greedy to lick the air, the bright flames leaped up, to be driven by the wind into obscurity with a shower of sparks. The chanting of the lamas was now a weird howling. The crowd wailed and screamed. The ceremonial offering at the presiding lama was at hand.

Someone thrust into Kito's trembling hand a bowl filled with sulphur, salt, and red wine. With a sudden shrill exclamation of warning, the Grand Lama thrust the triangular paper at the end of his long stick into the flames. At the same instant Kito ran close to the fire and flung the contents of his bowl into the roaring mass.

There was a sharp, blinding explosion. A high blue flame spurted upward, and all the bad luck and demons that had been coerced into the paper disappeared at once in smoke...

The furious beating of the drums, the shrill blaring of the trumpets, the howling of the lamas, and the screaming of the people, drowned Kito's cry of agony as he fell clasping his hands to his tortured eyes. It was both a cry of farewell and of greeting: farewell to the girl of the forest who would vainly await him on the morrow by the river bank as the light grew and the wind whispered in the foliage and the evaporating moisture gathered like a bloom on the feathery fronds; greeting to the memory of all her unimaginable grace and loveliness and joy, that, as a newfound image, went to dwell with him on the vast plain of everlasting twilight where even the likeness of a goddess was invisible.



THE EXECUTIONER

by RACHEL COSGROVE PAYES

(author of *The Door*)

RACHEL COSGROVE PAYES would also have been present in that never-never issue of *WEIRD TERROR TALES*. She was one of the very last writers to contribute to the OZ series, originated by L. Frank Baum. Since then, she has written numbers of more or less mundane novels for the now-discontinued Avalon hardcover series, as well as several science fiction mystery novels for Avalon, these latter under the name of L. E. Arch.

PROFESSOR HILARY MARTIN whistled softly as he unlocked the door to his cottage near the Institute. The work was going splendidly; much faster than he had dreamed possible. Reports from China were encouraging; India was borderline; even the man in Moscow reported considerable success. At this rate, it wouldn't take nearly the five years he had requested when the Institute was set up.

The good mood lasted until he switched on the light in the living room and found himself looking at a hard-eyed man who sat in his favorite armchair. The pistol in the man's steady hand was as cold and hard as his eyes.

"I've been waiting for you, Professor Martin. Sit down." The armed man gestured with his head, indicating a chair squarely across the room from him.

Martin sat, thinking with near computer speed. Who was this? A relative of Kersh, perhaps, intent on revenge? A disgruntled lab man who hadn't been able to get into the Institute? Robbery didn't enter Martin's mind. A thief didn't sit in your favorite armchair, waiting patiently for you to come home.

Quite calmly he asked, "Who are you?"

' In a voice devoid of emotion, the gunman answered. "I am The Executioner."

A finger of cold touched Martin in his stomach. No one knew—everyone had heard of—but The Executioner was only a rumor, a product of the times, a bogeyman for adults.

Still calm, Martin asked, "What do you want of me?"

"I am The Executioner. I am here to arrange your death."

There was an unreal quality to it all. It was a nightmare conversation, and soon Martin knew he would wake to realize it was all a dream.

"Why am I to die? Or don't you tell that?"

"I tell, if you wish to hear. I even listen to your defense, if you wish to offer one. I must warn you, though, that nothing you say will change my mind. I have done my investigation, and I know you are guilty as accused. So, you must die."

Trying to keep the incipient hysteria out of his voice, Martin asked, "You will kill me in cold blood? Aren't you afraid that someone will hear the shots and come running?"

The hard-eyed man bared his teeth in what could be a smile. "You will have an accident, Professor. It is in the national interest that you die; and it is even more in the national interest that you die accidentally. I shall arrange it. Don't worry; you won't suffer, even though you have caused untold suffering. I am not a monster. I am The Executioner."

"But why?" The words came out a hoarse whisper. "Why?"

"Because of the work you direct at the Institute."

Untold relief swept over Martin, leaving him limp. "The Institute. We're saving mankind at the Institute. I am working on direct orders from the President, himself."

The Executioner just looked at him. "So am I"

"You're joking. You must be. I tell you, I have authorization from the President to do what I'm doing."

"Somehow, Professor, you've exceeded that authority you offer so

glibly." Then, after a moment's pause, The Executioner asked, "Does he know about Kersh?"

"Ah, so it is Kersh. You aren't The Executioner at all; you're a member of Kersh's family, bent on revenge. I can explain it all. Kersh died a hero's death, in the line of duty. He gave his life for his country; but—in the national interest, if I may borrow your own words, sir—the government had to deny him. Perhaps, later, when my work is finished, and our country is saved, then Kersh can receive posthumously the honor he deserves."

The gunman shook his head gently. "I've already told you, Professor, I am The Executioner. Kersh was the first lead, that's all. It was a tangled web you spun; but Kersh's death left a dangling strand which led, eventually, to the spider at the center—you."

"I tell you," and Martin heard his voice rise dangerously, "I tell you that Kersh died for his country—for you!"

"I know how Kersh died." The Executioner's eyes bored into Martin.

... Kersh tightened his left arm until he felt the reassuring bulk of the container strapped in his left armpit. He was wearying fast, now; but he was almost there. Already, ahead of him in the dark, twinkled the lights of the Oming-Huan. The rice seedlings would be ready for planting. All he had to do was to work his way in without being spotted by the guards, remove the vial which he had brought so far, with such hazard, release the contents on the seedlings, and then make his way back out of Red China without capture.

If he were unlucky enough to fall into their hands, he had the capsule.

He wouldn't be unlucky, though. With a Chinese mother, there'd been no need for plastic surgery. With his gift of linguistics, he not only looked the part, but also sounded it. Even if they captured him, who would guess him to be an American agent? Nationalist, perhaps—but he would not allow himself to be taken prisoner. The capsule—the capsule did him no good. The guards fell on him as he uncorked the vial, both hands occupied.

"Do not allow it to spill," a shrill voice ordered.

A deft hand caught the deadly container a moment too soon, before the seedlings were contaminated. Kersh fell unconscious, the deft blow delivered with feeling.

Kersh talked. Even his careful indoctrination at the Institute wasn't enough. Every man has his breaking point; and once relieved of the capsule, Kersh's resources were not enough.

Kersh did not know too much, of course; but he was the starting point.

The trial was a field day for the propagandists. *American Imperialists Try to Poison Rice Crop*, screamed headlines which were repeated all over the world.

The trial was a mockery, and Kersh died before a firing squad ...

"But you don't understand," Martin pleaded hoarsely. "It's a war—and in a war, we must use any means within our power to win. The population must be kept within bounds, or we shall all starve in a generation."

"So you have chosen those who must starve now."

Martin relaxed slightly. "You do understand, then. Yes, I am an historian. All this talk of birth control is too late. The explosion of humanity must be controlled by the historically proven methods."

"War, flood, famine and pestilence."

Martin now ventured a tiny smile. "Of course. But the most effective, the easiest to produce without harming us—famine."

Martin did not register the irony of The Executioner's next question.

"And those eighty odd longshoremen who died in the pitched battle in San Francisco? Weren't they Americans?"

Martin flinched. "That was unfortunate. The situation got out of hand. We at the Institute never intended—"

"Then you do admit that you started the dock strike?"

Martin was reasonableness itself. "They were shipping tons of wheat to Asia. The safest way to stop it was to precipitate a strike."

"Safest? Not for the men who were killed. Not for their families. Not for the police who intervened."

"Safest for the government." There was a hint of impatience in Martin's voice now. The Executioner had seemed to understand; now he wasn't so sure. "In the public interest, as you reminded me, it was best to do it this way. If the government withdrew its offer of wheat for the starving billions in Asia, we show up as dirty dogs. This way, the government saves face by trying to stop the strike. Not succeeding, the wheat doesn't cross the ocean."

"And millions die."

"The classic method of keeping the population in check. Who is to blame? No one. Famine is an historical fact. And if it happens to our sworn enemies, so much better."

"You condemn them to death so easily."

"You've condemned me," Martin reminded him. "Why is it worse to encourage famine than to go in and kill them with H-bombs, with flame throwers, with bayonets? Are they more dead if they starve? Is it better to

kill them at the terrible cost of the lives of our young men, or to allow Nature to restore her natural balance which we have upset with our meddling?"

"Then this is what the Institute of Population Study is all about?" The Executioner asked, but not for an instant did the gun waver from its deadly aim.

Martin felt better. He could even ignore the gun now. He knew he could sell The Executioner, just as he'd sold the President originally. "We are inconsistent to the point of idiocy. We rush to the underdeveloped nations of the world, carrying medicine in one hand to cut down the death rate—the infant mortality rate—to keep alive the ones unfit for survival; while on the other hand we brandish The Pill and the pamphlets on birth control. We cry that the population explosion is the curse of modern civilization; yet we rush food to the starving, worry about outbreaks of typhus in disaster areas, and pauperize our nation to feed our enemies."

"Are all your agents as well trained as Kersh?"

"Some even better. To have been a truly successful agent, Kersh should have died resisting capture."

"That is a hard attitude, Professor Martin."

"It's a hard world. Sticky sentimentality will get us nowhere. It takes great courage to do what we do in the Institute. I have scientists working with deadly viruses. I have men training for high government posts, where they will be able to impede agricultural progress in certain areas of the world; too few technicians sent out to help underdeveloped nations—delays in shipping heavy farming equipment—inferior fertilizers—strikes, strikes, strikes. All of these things help us help Nature."

"Faminemongers."

"I am an historian, not a wide-eyed idealist. I do what I can to save the world. The population explosion must be stopped before the masses of humanity choke themselves to extinction."

"It is time, now, to go, Professor."

He looked with amazement at The Executioner. "But don't you understand what I've been saying to you? I am saving the world. I have the authority direct from the President, himself." He paused to give dramatic impact to his trump card. "I have a tape recording of the private conversation I had with him."

"I've heard it."

"Impossible," Martin cried. "No one else knows about it. The President had no idea I was taping our conversation on a miniature recorder."

"I found the tape last week and played it."

Martin's assurance dribbled away. "Impossible," he muttered. "The combination—"

"—is right seventeen, left nine, right one, right spin twice, left four. Twist to open."

Martin stared aghast at The Executioner.

"Safe cracking is just one of my many talents." The irony went over Martin's head.

"You couldn't have listened to the tape." He sprang to his feet, rushed to the picture which concealed the wall safe, flung it aside, and with fumbling fingers, twisted the dial. Opening the door, he drew forth the tape.

Triumphantly, he held it towards the gunman. "My insurance policy. You must have played something else. Here, I'll run it for you."

The Executioner shook his head sadly. "Let me quote pertinent bits, Professor ..."

"... You keep referring to the historical methods of population control, Professor Martin. This Institute of Population Study which you want me to establish—is it a better contraceptive pill you'll develop?"

"Not exactly, Mr. President. Frankly, the fewer who know the details, the more successful my plan. Give me five years—"

"That's a long time, and you want a lot of money. I'd have to know what I was asking Congress for. You must understand that."

"Of course, Mr. President. It's for research. Congressmen hallow the very sound of the word. We gather statistics, we implement measures, we delve into whys and wherefores. You can handle Congress."

"But I'm still not sure—"

"I am your only hope—the hope of the nation."

"Very well, Professor Martin. I'm a pretty good judge of men. Have to be in my job. Things are getting serious in this population problem. If you can do what you say—"

"And I can, sir."

"Then consider the Institute an accomplished fact, with yourself as director ..."

The Executioner finished his quoting.

Martin shook his head to clear it. "So you did know what was on the tape. Then why this nonsense about killing me? You heard the President. He gave me the green light."

"He hadn't the foggiest idea what you intended to do. It's mass murder, Professor, and he isn't condoning it. I thought he'd have a heart attack

(Turn to page 83)

THE SETTLEMENT OF DRYDEN VS. SHARD

by W. O. INGLIS

The humorous ghost story was far from a rarity in popular magazines during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (before the Great War of 1914-18), and this present example was written (and is being reprinted) solely for amusement. It appeared in the September 1902 issue of *HARPER'S MAGAZINE*, and one found it in the section entitled *The Editor's Drawer*—a miscellaneous presentation of light short-short fiction, cartoons, verse, jokes, and comment. The department appeared in every issue, and doubtless was a favorite with the readers. My thanks to *Charles Hildley* for loaning me a copy of the magazine.

IT WAS WITH DEEP RELIEF that Theron Slocum fell into the easy-chair before his library fire. After two weeks of slavish delving, night and day, he had finished the preparation of the plaintiff's case in *Gormley vs Glendinning*.

As Slocum's eyes rested upon the glowing bank of red coals he felt as if Nirvana could bring no finer joy than this consciousness of good work faithfully done. Dreamily he heard the tinkling chime of the quarter past

midnight. Then—oh, too ridiculous! Yet as he tried to give himself once more to reverie he distinctly heard again an apologetic cough behind him.

"Out with you! How did you get in here?" he exclaimed as he whirled toward a thin man, very tall, and with a face the color of ashes, who stood regarding him mournfully. Slocum's hand grasped at the man's shoulder and swept through empty air. He staggered. He could feel his hair spring erect and bristle as a clump of dry sedge. He could not articulate.

"Pardon this intrusion," said the stranger, "but I've come to ask you to take my case. I have no card, but you may put down in your diary tomorrow that the ghost of Clark Dryden has called upon you."

Slocum's heart began to beat again. The necessity of impressing a client revived him. He lit a cigar. The late Dryden inhaled the fumes gratefully.

"The only way we ghosts can enjoy tobacco," he explained, "is by getting to leeward of a live smoker. Let me tell you the saddest instance of treachery you have ever heard. I want you to sue Teunis G. Shard for \$10,000 for professional services. Please don't interrupt me. My claim is quite regular. I worked for him—worked hard, too—as a haunter. He cheated me.

"Mr. Slocum, Shard is the worst man on Earth. I was his confidential clerk for ten years. When he found a little shortage in my accounts he held it over me like a whip, and made me work for small wages: he and drink soon made an end of me. The first midnight I was allowed to revisit Earth. I crept up behind him just as he turned off the lights in his bedroom, and I uttered the most awful moan I could manage. What do you think the old brute did? He laughed at me. He knew my voice.

"Don't go 'way mad, Dryden," the old robber said to me. 'I think we can do some business. How'd you like a little drink?'

"Now you see, Mr. Slocum, the only way we ghosts can drink is to inhale the fumes of burning alcohol. I was just dying— Well, I mean, I wanted a drink pretty badly. The old fellow must have seen me jump, for he lit the lamp of a chafing-dish and went on:

"You and I can do a neat turn in real estate, and I'll supply you with drink. You know the Shepherd place in Montvale, on the Gun Hill road? Shepherd has built him a new house at Montclair and the old one's on the market. I've offered him \$18,500 for it, but he wants \$25,000. You go over there and groan and meander through the place a few nights, and I guess he'll be glad to let it go for \$15,000.'

"I won't try to excuse what I did; but please remember I needed a drink more than anything else in the world—the next world. Old Shard

promised to reward me with half a pint of flaming alcohol every night, and I fell into the bargain.

"My efforts were successful. Mrs. Shepherd saw me first, and her screams woke her husband, and I wailed, and he dived into a wardrobe and pinched his fingers in the door in his hurry to lock it. Then old Shard dropped in casually next day, and Shepherd was glad to sell out to him for \$13,500.

"Shard sold the house in less than three months for \$20,000. First he ordered me to quit haunting. Then he coaxed the Psychological Research committee to investigate, gave 'em punch and supper for three or four nights—that stood him in only \$80 or \$90—and got their written certificate that there was no ghost on the place.

"Within three years I wrecked more happy homes than any other individual you ever heard of. Plaindale, Somerville, Montclair, Morristown, and all the Oranges were my stamping-ground. Old Shard went around picking up property for half its value and selling it soon afterward at a big advance. He was deep enough not to let me wreck two homes in one town, so no one suspected him. He used to give me my flaming half-pint of alcohol at three o'clock every morning as I was on my way home from a hard night's haunting, groaning, and clanking. Clank? Certainly. Next time I call on you I'll bring over the clanker I've invented. It is far more terrifying than all the old ancestral gyves and common chain clankers you ever heard of.

"When Shard had made enough money out of me to thrust himself into a lumber company and the silk business, and get himself made president of the Plaindale First National Bank, he deserted me. Said it was dangerous to burn alcohol in his library at that time of night. Think of it, Mr. Slocum—that man's made \$138,000 out of me, and he's cut off my alcohol! You go ahead and sue him for \$10,000 for my professional services."

"But, my dear sir," said Slocum, who was now puffing comfortably at his cigar, and had forgotten that he was talking with a ghost—"my dear sir, this is all very irregular—decidedly interesting, but highly irregular. I couldn't think of going into such a case."

"You won't?" exclaimed the ghost. "Why; your balance at the bank is down to two hundred dollars or less. You owe the tailor, the butcher, the baker. You need the money—"

"Get out! Run away, or I'll scatter you!" cried Slocum, who had now lost all sense of fear. The ghost involuntarily leaped back, but soon advanced again.

"You take my case," he wailed, "or I'll haunt your wife into hysterics. You don't think you can convince her I'm harmless, do you? You've tried explaining things to your wife, haven't you? Ha, ha! Just wait till she hears me gibber!"

Slocum surrendered. Before he fell asleep he had roughly drafted a method of action.

Tennis G. Shard, expanded from a man of mean affairs in New Jersey to an unscrupulous man of affairs in New York, sat in his Pine Street office. His secretary handed him a letter, saying it seemed new and important, and discreetly withdrew. He had read only one line when he bounded out of his big chair with an agility surprising in one of his bulk, and snapped the latches of both doors of his private office. Then he read carefully the letter, which was from Theron Slocum.

"Clark Dryden's claim," the lawyer wrote, "for \$10,125.55 for professional services rendered to you has been placed in my hands for collection. He claims to have assisted you in acquiring certain parcels of real estate, on which the commission due are set forth in the schedule I enclose. If the claim is not settled forthwith, I shall feel obliged to begin an action to recover the commissions."

Can Dryden recover? thought Shard. Surely not. How can a ghost sue or get judgment? A ghost is not a person. The Thing clearly had been able to consult counsel—the schedule showed that. But how could a ghost testify in court, when his hours on earth were limited from midnight to cockcrow? With a groan Shard remembered that Judge Deane, who presided in his district, was a member of the Psychical Society, and would hold sessions of court at any hour to hear evidence against him.

There was nothing for Shard to do but call on the ghost's lawyer. He hated lawyers—they took none of the risks and they always got part of the profits.

"Tell Mr. Slocum I must see him at once. Tell him it's Mister Shard!" roared a bullying voice on the sixteenth floor of the Warren Arcade building.

"Ask the gentleman to come in," was Mr. Slocum's reply.

Mr. Shard entered and slammed the door. Then, with his best bullying, apoplectic manner, "How dare you, sir?" he began, shaking the lawyer's letter high in air. "How dare you—"

"Mr. Shard," interrupted the lawyer, with a calmness that was wonderful when we consider his straits—"Mr. Shard, if you want a bill of particulars in this action, you had better let your attorney apply for it in the regular way. I am prepared to give every detail."

Only too well the financier understood. Great beads came out on his brow.

"I—I'll make you a proposition," he stammered. "I'll pay your client \$5000 and take his general release."

"That's something," mused Theron, with great gravity: "still, I wouldn't miss the fun of trying this case for any consideration. I am moved, I must admit, by the spectacle of suffering respectability that you present. I will do this: I will accept \$7000 in settlement of my client's just claim. I am his attorney in fact as well as at law, and I can give you your general release at once."

Teunis G. Shard hastily drew a checkbook from his pocket, filled out a form and signed it—not without a groan—and handed it to the lawyer. Slocum, in turn, filled all the blanks in a formidable-looking document, which to this day witnesseth that Clark Dryden, late of the State of New Jersey, doth release the said Teunis G. Shard, of the State of New Jersey, him and his heirs and assigns forever, of any and all claims of whatsoever kind and of whatsoever cause arising. When it was signed, the financier read it and put it in his pocket.

Success burned in Slocum like a fever until Saturday night. For two hours before midnight he sat in his tiny library. Then he turned off the gas and lit the lamp of the chafing-dish, and instantly became aware of his friend Dryden hovering over the wavering blue, gold-threaded flame and murmuring: "Here's how!" For minutes the shade enjoyed the shaking of his posthumous thirst.

"How's our suit?" he asked at last.

"Settled out of court for this," replied Theron, tossing the check on a table remote from the alcohol.

"Um-m-m! You're a wonder," cried the ghost. "Well, you can keep the money. It's no use to me, you know. All I ask is one half-pint of alcohol every Monday night for three months and two nights. By that time I hope to get the better of the habit. Is it a bargain?"

"Surest thing in the world," replied Theron, lighting a Carolina perfecto for his own and his disembodied client's benefit, and presently regarding him over a tinkling glass in which was an exhibition of something Scotch and mellow: "Surest thing in the world. Dryden, here's to you!"

THE EXECUTIONER

(Continued from page 77)

when he found out what cooked behind those impressive portals at the Institute." He gestured with his head. "It's time to go."

Outside of four key men in the government, only one person knew that he was The Executioner. Sonya knew and she understood.

"It's just a job, honey. Someone has to do it. If not you, then someone else—and the money's good."

He always went to her after an execution. This time, though, Martin's funeral was over and forgotten before he sought her out.

She had clipped the obituary from the paper.

"I thought you weren't coming, honey. It's been so long. Her eyes were wise as she greeted him. "Something go wrong with this job?"

He frowned. "What makes you think that?"

"I can tell, honey, from your attitude. But it went off beautifully, didn't it? A car accident, according to the obituary. And in another paper, I saw some hint of a shakeup at the Institute. Wasn't that your job? And you did it well. What's bothering you? You can tell Sonya."

Yes, he could tell Sonya, even though he could never say it to another soul.

"You know that I never take a case unless I'm convinced of the necessity of the execution—its justice."

"I know."

"This time—I don't know, Sonya. I was sure; even after I talked with him, I was sure. It's only since the execution that I've wondered, remembering the things he said to me that night—did I execute a madman, or did I murder the savior of mankind?"



THE GRISLY HORROR

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

(author of *The Noseless Horror*, *Worms of the Earth*, etc.)

Just as the tales of Jules de Grandin pre-empted most of Seabury Quinn's writing for *WEIRD TALES* from the end of 1925 to mid 1936, so the Conan series was about all we saw from Robert E. Howard for a number of years. However, a few independent stories began to spell Conan in 1935, and this is one of them. Glen Lord tells me that the original title was *The Moon of Zambeswei* which is, I agree, a weird-sounding title; but every title change by an editor was not necessarily a bad thing, and I inclined to agree that the change is more just to what you will actually find in the story.

1 The Horror in the Pines

THE SILENCE OF THE PINE WOODS lay like a brooding cloak about the soul of Bristol McGrath. The black shadows seemed fixed, immovable as the weight of superstition that overhung this forgotten back-country. Vague ancestral dreads stirred at the back of McGrath's mind; for he was born in the pine woods, and sixteen years of roaming about the world had not erased their shadows. The fearsome tales at which he had shuddered as

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a child whispered again in his consciousness, tales of black shapes stalking the midnight glades...

Cursing these childish memories, McGrath quickened his pace. The dim trail wound tortuously between dense walls of giant trees. No wonder he had been unable to hire anyone in the distant river village to drive him to the Ballville estate. The road was impassable for a vehicle, choked with rotting stumps and new growth. Ahead of him it bent sharply.

McGrath halted short, frozen to immobility. The silence had been broken at last, in such a way as to bring a chill tingling to the backs of his hands. For the sound had been the unmistakable groan of a human being

in agony. Only for an instant was McGrath motionless. Then he was gliding about the bend of the trail with the noiseless slouch of a hunting panther.

A blue snub-nosed revolver had appeared as if by magic in his right hand. His left involuntarily clenched in his pocket on the bit of paper that was responsible for his presence in that grim forest. That paper was a frantic and mysterious appeal for aid; it was signed by McGrath's worst enemy, and contained the name of a woman long dead.

McGrath rounded the bend in the trail, every nerve tense and alert, expecting anything—except what he actually saw. His startled eyes hung on the grisly object for an instant, and then swept the forest walls. Nothing stirred there. A dozen feet back from the trail visibility vanished in a ghoulish twilight, where anything might lurk unseen. McGrath dropped to his knee beside the figure that lay in the trail before him.

It was a man, spread-eagled, hands and feet bound to four pegs driven deeply in the hard-packed earth; a black-bearded, hook-nosed, swarthy man. "Ahmed!" muttered McGrath. "Ballville's Arab servant! God!"

For it was not the binding cords that brought the glaze to the Arab's eyes. A weaker man than McGrath might have sickened at the mutilations which keen knives had wrought on the man's body. McGrath recognized the work of an expert in the art of torture. Yet a spark of life still throbbled in the tough frame of the Arab. McGrath's gray eyes grew bleaker as he noted the position of the victim's body, and his mind flew back to another, grimmer jungle, and a half-flayed black man pegged out on a path as a warning to the white man who dared invade a forbidden land.

He cut the cords, shifted the dying man to a more comfortable position. It was all he could do. He saw the delirium ebb momentarily in the bloodshot eyes, saw recognition glimmer there. Clots of bloody foam splashed the matted beard. The lips writhed soundlessly, and McGrath glimpsed the bloody stump of a severed tongue.

The black-nailed fingers began scrabbling in the dust. They shook, clawing erratically, but with purpose. McGrath bent close, tense with interest, and saw crooked lines grow under the quivering fingers. With the last effort of an iron will, the Arab was tracing a message in the characters of his own language. McGrath recognized the name: "Richard Ballville"; it was followed by "danger," and the hand waved weakly up the trail; then—and McGrath stiffened convulsively—"Constance". One final effort of the dragging finger traced "John De Al—" Suddenly the bloody frame was convulsed by one last sharp agony; the lean, sinewy hand knotted

spasmodically and then fell limp. Ahmed ibn Suleyman was beyond vengeance or mercy.

McGrath rose, dusting his hands, aware of the tense stillness of the grim woods around him; aware of a faint rustling in their depths that was not caused by any breeze. He looked down at the mangled figure with involuntary pity, though he knew well the foulness of the Arab's heart, a black evil that had matched that of Ahmed's master, Richard Ballville. Well, it seemed that master and man had at last met their match in human fiendishness. But who, or *what*? For a hundred years the Ballvilles had ruled supreme over this back-country, first over their wide plantations and hundreds of slaves, and later over the submissive descendants of those slaves. Richard, the last of the Ballvilles, had exercised as much authority over the pinelands as any of his autocratic ancestors. Yet from this country where men had bowed to the Ballvilles for a century, had come that frenzied cry of fear, a telegram that McGrath clenched in his coat pocket.

Stillness succeeded the rustling, more sinister than any sound. McGrath knew he was watched; knew that the spot where Ahmed's body lay was the invisible deadline that had been drawn for him. He believed that he would be allowed to turn and retrace his steps unmolested to the distant village. He knew that if he continued on his way, death would strike him suddenly and unseen. Turning, he strode back the way he had come.

He made the turn and kept straight on until he had passed another crook in the trail. Then he halted, listened. All was silent. Quickly he drew the paper from his pocket, smoothed out the wrinkles and read, again, in the cramped scrawl of the man he hated most on earth:

Bristol:

If you still love Constance Brand, for God's sake forget your hate and come to Ballville Manor as quickly as the devil can drive you.

RICHARD BALLVILLE

That was all. It reached him by telegraph in the Far Western city where McGrath had resided since his return from Africa. He would have ignored it, but for the mention of Constance Brand. That name had sent a choking, agonizing pulse of amazement through his soul, had sent him racing toward the land of his birth by train and plane, as if, indeed, the devil were on his heels. It was the name of one he thought dead for three years—since 1931; the name of the only woman Bristol McGrath had ever loved.

Replacing the telegram, he left the trail and headed westward, pushing his powerful frame between the thick-set trees. His feet made little sound on the matted pine needles. His progress was all but noiseless. Not for nothing had he spend his boyhood in the country of the big pines.

Three hundred yards from the old road he came upon what he sought—an ancient trail paralleling the road. Choked with young growth, it was little more than a trace through the thick pines. He knew that it ran to the back of the Ballville mansion; did not believe the secret watchers would be guarding it. For how could they know he remembered it?

He hurried south along it, his ears whetted for any sound. Sight alone could not be trusted in that forest. The mansion, he knew, was not far away, now. He was passing through what had once been fields, in the days of Richard's grandfather, running almost up to the spacious lawns that girdled the Manor. But for half a century they had been abandoned to the advance of the forest.

But now he glimpsed the Manor, a hint of solid bulk among the pine tops ahead of him. And almost simultaneously his heart shot into his throat as a scream of human anguish knifed the stillness. He could not tell whether it was a man or a woman who screamed, and his thought that it might be a woman winged his feet in his reckless dash toward the building that loomed starkly up just beyond the straggling fringe of trees.

The young pines had even invaded the once generous lawns. The whole place wore an aspect of decay. Behind the Manor, the barns, and outhouses which once housed slave families, were crumbling in ruin. The mansion itself seemed to totter above the litter, a creaky giant, rat-gnawed and rotting, ready to collapse at any untoward event. With the stealthy tread of a tiger Bristol McGrath approached a window on the side of the house. From that window sounds were issuing that were an affront to the tree-filtered sunlight and a crawling horror to the brain.

Nerving himself for what he might see, he peered within.

2. Torture

HE WAS LOOKING INTO A GREAT dusty chamber which might have served as a ballroom in ante-bellum days; its lofty ceiling was hung with cobwebs, its rich oak panels showed dark and stained. But there was a fire in the great fireplace—a small fire, just large enough to heat to a white glow the slender steel rods thrust into it.

But it was only later that Bristol McGrath saw the fire and the things that glowed on the hearth. His eyes were gripped like a spell on the master of the Manor; and once again he looked on a dying man.

A heavy beam had been nailed to the paneled wall, and from it jutted a rude cross-piece. From this cross-piece Richard Ballville hung by cords about his wrists. His toes barely touched the floor, tantalizingly, inviting him to stretch his frame continually in an effort to relieve the agonizing strain on his arms. The cords had cut deeply into his wrists; blood trickled down his arms; his hands were black and swollen almost to bursting. He was naked except for his trousers, and McGrath saw that already the white-hot irons had been horribly employed. There was reason enough for the deathly pallor of the man, the cold beads of agony upon his skin. Only his fierce vitality had allowed him thus long to survive the ghastly burns on his limbs and body.

On his breast had been burned a curious symbol—a cold hand hid itself on McGrath's spine. For he recognized that symbol, and once again his memory raced away across the world and the years to a black, grim, hideous jungle where drums bellowed in fire-shot darkness and naked priests of an abhorred cult traced a frightful symbol in quivering human flesh.

Between the fireplace and the dying man squatted a thick-set black man, clad only in ragged, muddy trousers. His back was toward the window, presenting an impressive pair of shoulders. His bullet-head was set squarely between those gigantic shoulders, like that of a frog, and he appeared to be avidly watching the face of the man on the cross-piece.

Richard Ballville's bloodshot eyes were like those of a tortured animal, but they were fully sane and conscious; they blazed with desperate vitality. He lifted his head painfully and his gaze swept the room. Outside the window McGrath instinctively shrank back. He did not know whether Ballville saw him or not. The man showed no sign to betray the presence of the watcher to the torturer who scrutinized him. Then the man turned his head toward the fire, reaching a long arm toward a glowing iron—and Ballville's eyes blazed with a fierce and urgent meaning the watcher could not mistake. McGrath did not need the agonized motion of the tortured head that accompanied the look. With a tigerish bound he was over the window-sill and in the room, even as the startled torturer shot erect, whirling agilely.

McGrath had not drawn his gun. He dared not risk a shot that might bring other foes upon him. There was a butcher-knife in the belt that held up the ragged, muddy trousers. It seemed to leap like a living thing into

the hand of the man as he turned. But in McGrath's hand gleamed a curved Afghan dagger that had served him well in many a bygone battle.

Knowing the advantage of instant and relentless attack, he did not pause. His feet scarcely touched the floor inside before they were hurling him at the astounded man.

An inarticulate cry burst from the thick red lips. The eyes rolled wildly, the butcher-knife went back and hissed forward with the swiftness of a striking cobra that would have disemboweled a man whose thews were less steely than those of Bristol McGrath.

But the torturer was involuntarily stumbling backward as he struck, and that instinctive action slowed his stroke just enough for McGrath to avoid it with a lightning-like twist of his torso. The long blade hissed under his arm-pit, slicing cloth and skin—and simultaneously the Afghan dagger ripped through the other's throat.

There was no cry, but only a choking gurgle as the man fell, spouting blood. McGrath had sprung free as a wolf springs after delivering the death-stroke. Without emotion he surveyed his handiwork. The man was already dead, his head half severed from his body. That slicing sidewise lunge that slew in silence, severing the throat to the spinal column, was a favorite stroke of the hairy hillmen that haunt the crags overhanging the Khyber Pass. Less than a dozen white men have ever mastered it. Bristol McGrath was one.

McGrath turned to Richard Ballville. Foam dripped on the seared, naked breast, and blood trickled from the lips. McGrath feared that Ballville had suffered the same mutilation that had rendered Ahmed speechless; but it was only suffering and shock that numbed Ballville's tongue. McGrath cut his cords and eased him down on a worn old divan near by. Ballville's lean, muscle-corded body quivered like taut steel strings under McGrath's hands. He gagged, finding his voice.

"I knew you'd come!" he gasped, writhing at the contact of the divan against his seared flesh. "I've hated you for years, but I knew—"

McGrath's voice was harsh as the rasp of steel. "What did you mean by your mention of Constance Brand? She is dead."

A ghastly smile twisted the thin lips. "No, she's not dead! But she soon will be, if you don't hurry. Quick! Brandy! There on the table—that beast didn't drink it all."

McGrath held the bottle to his lips; Ballville drank avidly. McGrath wondered at the man's iron nerve. That he was in ghastly agony was obvious. He should be screaming in a delirium of pain. Yet he held to sanity and spoke lucidly, though his voice was a laboring croak.

"I haven't much time," he choked. "Don't interrupt. Save your curses till later. We both loved Constance Brand. She loved you. Three years ago she disappeared. Her garments were found on the bank of a river. Her body was never recovered. You went to Africa to drown your sorrow; I retired to the estate of my ancestors and became a recluse.

"What you didn't know—what the world didn't know—was that Constance Brand came with me! No, she didn't drown. That ruse was my idea. For three years Constance Brand has lived in this house!" He achieved a ghastly laugh. "Oh, don't look so stunned, Bristol. She didn't come of her own free will. She loved you too much. I kidnapped her, brought her here by force—Bristol!" His voice rose to a frantic shriek. "If you kill me you'll never learn where she is!"

The frenzied hands that had locked on his corded throat relaxed and sanity returned to the red eyes of Bristol McGrath.

"Go on," he whispered in a voice not even he recognized.

"I couldn't help it," gasped the dying man. "She was the only woman I ever loved—oh, don't sneer, Bristol. The others didn't count. I brought her here where I was king. She couldn't escape, couldn't get word to the outside world. No one lives in this section except descendants of the slaves owned by my family. My word is—*was*—their only law.

"I swear I didn't harm her. I only kept her prisoner, trying to force her to marry me. I didn't want her any other way. I was mad, but I couldn't help it. I come of a race of autocrats who took what they wanted, recognized no law but their own desires. You know that. You understand it. You come of the same breed yourself.

"Constance hates me, if that's any consolation to you, damn you. She's strong, too. I thought I could break her spirit. But I couldn't, not without the whip, and I couldn't bear to use that." He grinned hideously at the wild growl that rose unbidden to McGrath's lips. The big man's eyes were coals of fire; his hard hands knotted into iron mallets.

A spasm racked Ballville, and blood started from his lips. His grin faded and he hurried on.

"All went well until the foul fiend inspired me to send for John De Albor. I met him in Vienna, years ago. He's from East Africa—a devil in human form! He saw Constance—lusted for her. When I finally realized that I tried to kill him. Then I found that he was stronger than I; that he'd made himself master of the blacks, to whom my word has always been law. He'd taught them his devilish cult—"

"Voodoo," muttered McGrath involuntarily.

"No! Voodoo is infantile beside this fiendishness. Look at the symbol on my breast, where De Albor burned it with a white-hot iron. You have been in Africa. You understand the brand of Zambabwe.

"De Albor turned my men against me. I tried to escape with Constance and Ahmed. My own blacks hemmed me in. I did smuggle a telegram through to the village by a man who remained faithful to me—they suspected him and tortured him until he admitted it. John De Albor brought me his head.

"Before the final break I hid Constance in a place where no one will ever find her, except you. De Albor tortured Ahmed until he told that I had sent for a friend of the girl's to aid us. Then De Albor sent his men up the road with what was left of Ahmed, as a warning to you if you came. It was this morning that they seized us; I hid Constance last night. Not even Ahmed knew where. De Albor tortured me to make me tell—" the dying man's hands clenched and a fierce passionate light blazed in his eyes. McGrath knew that not all the torments of all the hells could ever have wrung that secret from Ballville's iron lips.

"It was the least you could do," he said, his voice harsh with conflicting emotions. "I've lived in hell for three years because of you—and Constance has. You deserve to die. If you weren't dying already I'd kill you myself."

"Damn you, do you think I want your forgiveness?" gasped the dying man. "I'm glad you suffered. If Constance didn't need your help, I'd like to see you dying as I'm dying—and I'll be waiting for you in hell. But enough of this. De Albor left me awhile to go up the road and assure himself that Ahmed was dead. The beast got to swilling my brandy and decided to torture me some himself.

"Now listen—Constance is hidden in Lost Cave. No man on earth knows of its existence except you and me—not even the blacks. Long ago I put an iron door in the entrance, and I killed the man who did the work; so the secret is safe. There's no key. You've got to open it by working certain knobs."

It was more and more difficult for the man to enunciate intelligibly. Sweat dripped from his face, and the cords of his arms quivered.

"Run your fingers over the edge of the door until you find three knobs that form a triangle. You can't see them; you'll have to feel. Press each one in counter-clockwise motion, three times, around and around. Then pull on the bar. The door will open. Take Constance and fight your way out. If you see they're going to get you, shoot her! Don't let her fall into the hands of that beast—"

The voice rose to a shriek, foam spattered from the livid writhing lips,

and Richard Ballville heaved himself almost upright, then toppled limply back. The iron will that had animated the broken body had snapped at last, as a taut wire snaps.

McGrath looked down at the still form, his brain a maelstrom of seething emotions, then wheeled, glaring, every nerve atingle, his pistol springing into his hand.

3. The Dark Priest

A MAN STOOD IN THE DOORWAY that opened upon the great outer hall—a tall man in a strange alien garb. He wore a turban and a silk coat belted with a gay-hued girdle. Turkish slippers were on his feet. His skin was not much darker than McGrath's, his features distinctly oriental in spite of the heavy glasses he wore.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded McGrath, covering him.

"Ali ibn Suleyman, *effendi*," answered the other in faultless Arabic. "I came to this place of devils at the urging of my brother, Ahmed ibn Suleyman, whose soul may the Prophet ease. In New Orleans the letter came to me. I hastened here. And lo, stealing through the woods, I saw black men dragging my brother's corpse to the river. I came on, seeking his master."

McGrath mutely indicated the dead man. The Arab bowed his head in stately reverence. "My brother loved him," he said. "I would have vengeance for my brother and my brother's master. *Effendi*, let me go with you."

"All right," McGrath was afire with impatience. He knew the fanatical clan-loyalty of the Arabs, knew that Ahmed's one decent trait had been a fierce devotion for the scoundrel he served. "Follow me."

With a last glance at the master of the Manor and the black body sprawling like a human sacrifice before him, McGrath left the chamber of torture. Just so, he reflected, one of Ballville's warrior-king ancestors might have lain in some dim past age, with a slaughtered slave at his feet to serve his spirit in the land of ghosts.

With the Arab at his heels, McGrath emerged into the girdling pines that dumpered in the still beat of noon. Faintly to his ears a distant pulse of sound was borne by a vagrant drift of breeze. It sounded like the throb of a far-away drum.

"Come on!" McGrath strode through the cluster of outhouses and

plunged into the woods that rose behind them. Here, too, had once stretched the fields that builded the wealth of the aristocratic Ballvilles; but for many years they had been abandoned. Paths straggled aimlessly through the ragged growth, until presently the growing denseness of the trees told the invaders that they were in forest that had never known the woodsman's ax. McGrath looked for a path. Impressions received in childhood are always enduring. Memory remains, overlaid by later things, but unerring through the years. McGrath found the path he sought, a dim trace, twisting through the trees.

They were forced to walk single file; the branches scraped their clothing, their feet sank into the carpet of pine needles. The land trended gradually lower. Pines gave way to cypresses, choked with underbrush. Scummy pools of stagnant water glimmered under the trees. Bullfrogs croaked, mosquitoes sang with maddening insistence about them. Again the distant drum throbbed across the pinelands.

McGrath shook the sweat out of his eyes. That drum roused memories well fitted to these somber surroundings. His thoughts reverted to the hideous scar seared on Richard Ballville's naked breast. Ballville had supposed that he, McGrath, knew its meaning; but he did not. That it portended black horror and madness he knew, but its full significance he did not know. Only once before had he seen that symbol, in the horror-haunted country of Zambewi, into which few white men had ever ventured, and from which only one white man had escaped alive. Bristol McGrath was that man, and he had only penetrated the fringe of that abysmal land of jungle and black swamp. He had not been able to plunge deep enough into that forbidden realm either to prove or to disprove the ghastly tales men whispered of an ancient cult surviving a prehistoric age, of the worship of a monstrosity whose mold violated an accepted law of nature. Little enough he had seen; but what he had seen had filled him with shuddering horror that sometimes returned now in crimson nightmares.

No word had passed between the men since they had left the Manor. McGrath plunged on through the vegetation that choked the path. A fat, blunt-tailed moccasin slithered from under his feet and vanished. Water could not be far away; a few more steps revealed it. They stood on the edge of a dank, slimy marsh from which rose a miasma of rotting vegetable matter. Cypresses shadowed it. The path ended at its edge. The swamp stretched away and away, lost to sight swiftly in twilight dimness.

"What now, *effendi*?" asked Ali. "Are we to swim this morass?"

"It's full of bottomless quagmires," answered McGrath. "It would be

suicide for a man to plunge into it. Not even the piny woods blacks have ever tried to cross it. But there is a way to get to the hill that rises in the middle of it. You can just barely glimpse it, among the branches of the cypresses, see? Years ago, when Ballville and I were boys—and friends—we discovered an old, old Indian path, a secret, submerged road that led to that hill. There's a cave in the hill, and a woman is imprisoned in that cave. I'm going to it. Do you want to follow me, or to wait for me here? The path is a dangerous one."

"I will go, *effendi*," answered the Arab.

McGrath nodded in appreciation, and began to scan the trees about him. Presently he found what he was looking for—a faint blaze on a huge cypress, an old mark, almost imperceptible. Confidently then, he stepped into the marsh beside the tree. He himself had made that mark, long ago. Scummy water rose over his shoe soles, but no higher. He stood on a flat rock, or rather on a heap of rocks, the topmost of which was just below the stagnant surface. Locating a certain gnarled cypress far out in the shadow of the marsh, he began walking directly toward it, spacing his strides carefully, each carrying him to a rock-step invisible below the murky water. Ali ibn Suleyman followed him, imitating his motions.

Through the swamp they went, following the marked trees that were their guide-posts. McGrath wondered anew at the motives that had impelled the ancient builders of the trail to bring these huge rocks from afar and sink them like piles into the slush. The work must have been stupendous, requiring no mean engineering skill. Why had the Indians built this broken road to Lost Island? Surely that isle and the cave in it had some religious significance to the red men; or perhaps it was their refuge against some stronger foe.

The going was slow; a misstep meant a plunge into marshy ooze, into unstable mire that might swallow a man alive. The island grew out of the trees ahead of them—a small knoll, girdled by a vegetation-choked beach. Through the foliage was visible the rocky wall that rose sheer from the beach to a height of fifty or sixty feet. It was almost like a granite block rising from a flat sandy rim. The pinnacle was almost bare of growth.

McGrath was pale, his breath coming in quick gasps. As they stepped upon the beach-like strip, Ali, with a glance of commiseration, drew a flask from his pocket. "Drink a little brandy, *effendi*," he urged, touching the mouth to his own lips, oriental-fashion. "It will aid you."

McGrath knew that Ali thought his evident agitation was a result of exhaustion. But he was scarcely aware of his recent exertions. It was the

emotions that raged within him—the thought of Constance Brand, whose beautiful form had haunted his troubled dreams for three dreary years. He gulped deeply of the liquor, scarcely tasting it, and handed back the flask. "Come on!"

The pounding of his own heart was suffocating, drowning the distant drum, as he thrust through the choking vegetation at the foot of the cliff. On the gray rock above the green mask appeared a curious carved symbol, as he had seen it years ago, when its discovery led him and Richard Ballville to the hidden cavern. He tore aside the clinging vines and fronds, and his breath sucked in at the sight of a heavy iron door set in the narrow mouth that opened in the granite wall.

McGrath's fingers were trembling as they swept over the metal, and behind him he could hear Ali breathing heavily. Some of the white man's excitement had imparted itself to the Arab. McGrath's hands found the three knobs, forming the apices of a triangle—mere protuberances, not apparent to the sight. Controlling his jumping nerves, he pressed them as Ballville had instructed him, and felt each give slightly at the third pressure. Then, holding his breath, he grasped the bar that was welded in the middle of the door, and pulled. Smoothly, on oiled hinges, the massive portal swung open.

They looked into a wide tunnel that ended in another door, this a grille of steel bars. The tunnel was not dark; it was clean and roomy, and the ceiling had been pierced to allow light to enter, the holes covered with screens to keep out insects and reptiles. But through the grille he glimpsed something that sent him racing along the tunnel, his heart almost bursting through his ribs. Ali was close at his heels.

The grille-door was not locked. It swung outward under his fingers. He stood motionless, almost stunned with the impact of his emotions.

His eyes were dazzled by a gleam of gold; a sunbeam slanted down through the pierced rock roof and struck mellow fire from the glorious profusion of golden hair that flowed over the white arm that pillowed the beautiful head on the carved oak table.

"Constance!" It was a cry of hunger and yearning that burst from his livid lips.

Echoing the cry, the girl started up, staring wildly, her hands at her temples, her lambent hair rippling over her shoulders. To his dizzy gaze she seemed to float in an aureole of golden light.

"Bristol! Bristol McGrath!" she echoed his call with a haunting, incredulous cry. Then she was in his arms, her white arms clutching him in

a frantic embrace, as if she feared he were but a phantom that might vanish from her.

For the moment the world ceased to exist for Bristol McGrath. He might have been blind, deaf and dumb to the universe at large. His dazed brain was cognizant only of the woman in his arms, his senses drunken with the softness and fragrance of her, his soul stunned with the overwhelming realization of a dream he had thought dead and vanished forever.

When he could think consecutively again, he shook himself like a man coming out of a trance, and stared stupidly around him. He was in a wide chamber, cut in the solid rock. Like the tunnel, it was illumined from above, and the air was fresh and clean. There were chairs, tables and a hammock, carpets on the rocky floor, cans of food and a water-cooler. Ballville had not failed to provide for his captive's comfort. McGrath glanced around at the Arab, and saw him beyond the grille. Considerately he had not intruded upon their reunion.

"Three years!" the girl was sobbing. "Three years I've waited. I knew you'd come! I knew it! But we must be careful, my darling. Richard will kill you if he finds you—kill us both!"

"He's beyond killing anyone," answered McGrath. "But just the same, we've got to get out of here."

Her eyes flared with new terror. "Yes! John De Albor! Ballville was afraid of him. That's why he locked me in here. He said he'd sent for you. I was afraid for you—"

"Ali!" McGrath called. "Come in here. We're getting out of here now, and we'd better take some water and food with us. We may have to hide in the swamps for—"

Abruptly Constance shrieked, tore herself from her lover's arms. And McGrath, frozen by the sudden, awful fear in her wide eyes, felt the dull jolting impact of a savage blow at the base of his skull. Consciousness did not leave him, but a strange paralysis gripped him. He dropped like an empty sack on the stone floor and lay there like a dead man, helplessly staring up at the scene which tinged his brain with madness—Constance struggling frenziedly in the grasp of the man he had known as Ali ibn Suleyman, now terribly transformed.

The man had thrown off his turban and glasses, and McGrath read the truth with its grisly implications—the man was not an Arab. He was a mixed breed. Yet some of his blood must have been Arab, for there was a slightly Semitic cast to his countenance, and this cast, together with his oriental garb and his perfect acting of his part, had made him seem genuine. But now all this was discarded.

"You've killed him!" the girl sobbed hysterically, striving vainly to break away from the cruel fingers that prisoned her white wrists.

"He's not dead yet. The fool quaffed drugged brandy—a drug found only in the Zambewei jungles. It lies inactive in the system until made effective by a sharp blow on a nerve center."

"Please do something for him!" she begged.

"Why should I? He has served his purpose. Let him lie there until the swamp insects have picked his bones. I should like to watch that—but we will be far away before nightfall." McGrath's wrath and agony found expression only in his bloodshot eyes. He could not move hand or foot.

"It was well I returned alone to the Manor," laughed De Albor. "I stole up to the window while this fool talked with Richard Balville. The thought came to me to let him lead me to the place where you were hidden. It had never occurred to me that there was a hiding-place in the swamp. I had the Arab's coat, slippers and turban; I had thought I might use them sometime. The glasses helped, too. It was not difficult to make an Arab out of myself. This man had never seen John De Albor. I grew up a slave in the house of an Arab—before I ran away and wandered to the land of Zambewei.

"But enough. We must go. The drum has been muttering all day. The blacks are restless. I promised them a sacrifice to Zemba. I was going to use the Arab, but by the time I had tortured out of him the information I desired, he was no longer fit for a sacrifice. Well, let them hang their silly drum. They'd like to have you for the Bride of Zemba, but they don't know I've found you. I have a motor-boat hidden on the river five miles from here—"

"You fool!" shrieked Constance, struggling passionately. "Do you think you can carry a white girl down the river, like a slave?"

"I have a drug which will make you like a dead woman," he said. "You will lie in the bottom of the boat, covered by sacks. When I board the steamer that shall bear us from these shores, you will go into my cabin in a large, well-ventilated trunk. You will know nothing of the discomforts of the voyage. You will awake in Africa—"

He was fumbling in his shirt, necessarily releasing her with one hand. With a frenzied scream and a desperate wrench, she tore loose and sped out through the tunnel. John De Albor plunged after her, bellowing. A red haze floated before McGrath's maddened eyes. The girl would plunge to her death in the swamps, unless she remembered the guide-marks—perhaps it was death she sought, in preference to the fate planned for her by the fiendish De Albor.

They had vanished from his sight, out of the tunnel; but suddenly Constance screamed again, with a new poignancy. To McGrath's ears came an excited jabbering. De Albor's accents were lifted in angry protest. Constance was sobbing hysterically. The voices were moving away. McGrath got a vague glimpse of a group of figures through the masking vegetation as they moved across the line of the tunnel mouth. He saw Constance being dragged along by half a dozen giant blacks, typical pineland dwellers, and after them came John De Albor, his hands eloquent in dissension. That glimpse only, through the fronds, and then the tunnel mouth gaped empty and the sound of splashing water faded away through the marsh.

4. The Dark God's Hunger

IN THE BROODING SILENCE of the cavern Bristol McGrath lay staring blankly upward, his soul a seething hell. Fool, fool, to be taken in so easily! Yet, how could he have known? He had never seen De Albor; he had supposed he was a black, Ballville had called him a black beast, but he must have been referring to his soul. De Albor might pass anywhere for a white man.

The presence of those black men meant but one thing: they had followed him and De Albor, had seized Constance as she rushed from the cave. De Albor's evident fear bore a hideous implication; he had said the blacks wanted to sacrifice Constance—now she was in their hands.

"God!" The word burst from McGrath's lips, startling in the stillness, startling to the speaker. He was electrified; a few moments before he had been dumb. But now he discovered he could move his lips, his tongue. Life was stealing back through his dead limbs; they stung as if with returning circulation. Frantically he encouraged that sluggish flow. Laboriously he worked his extremities, his fingers, hands, wrists and finally, with a surge of wild triumph, his arms and legs. Perhaps De Albor's hellish drug had lost some of its power through age. Perhaps McGrath's unusual stamina threw off the effects as another man could not have done.

The tunnel door had not been closed, and McGrath knew why: they did not want to shut out the insects which would soon dispose of his helpless body; already the pests were streaming through the door, a noisome horde.

McGrath rose at last, staggering drunkenly, but with his vitality surging more strongly each second. When he tottered from the cave, no living thing met his glare. Hours had passed since the blacks had departed with their prey. He strained his ears for the drum. It was silent. The stillness rose like an invisible black mist around him. Stumblingly he splashed along the rock-trail that led to hard ground. Had they taken their captive back to the death-haunted Manor, or deeper into the pinelands?

Their tracks were thick in the mud: half a dozen pairs of bare, splay feet, the slender prints of Constance's shoes, the marks of De Albor's Turkish slippers. He followed them with increasing difficulty as the ground grew higher and harder.

He would have missed the spot where they turned off the dim trail but for the fluttering of a bit of silk in the faint breeze. Constance had brushed against a tree-trunk there, and the rough bark had shredded off a fragment of her dress. The band had been headed east, toward the Manor. At the spot where the bit of cloth hung, they had turned sharply southward. The matted pine needles showed no tracks, but disarranged vines and branches bent aside marked their progress, until McGrath, following these signs, came out upon another trail leading southward.

Here and there were marshy spots, and these showed the prints of feet, bare and shod. McGrath hastened along the trail, pistol in hand, in full possession of his faculties at last. His face was grim and pale. De Albor had not had an opportunity to disarm him after striking that treacherous blow. Both he and the blacks of the pinelands believed him to be lying helpless back in Lost Cave. That, at least, was to his advantage.

He kept straining his ears in vain for the drum he had heard earlier in the day. The silence did not reassure him. In a voodoo sacrifice, drums would be thundering, but he knew he was dealing with something even more ancient and abhorrent than voodoo.

Voodoo was comparatively a young religion, after all, born in the hills of Haiti. Behind the froth of voodooism rose the grim religions of Africa, like granite cliffs glimpsed through a mask of green fronds. Voodooism was a mewling infant beside the black, immemorial colossus that had reared its terrible shape in the older land through uncounted ages. Zambelweil. The very name sent a shudder through him, symbolic of horror and fear. It was more than the name of a country and the mysterious tribe that inhabited that country; it signified something fearfully old and evil, something that had survived its natural epoch—a religion of the Night, and a deity whose name was Death and Horror.

Following that winding path through the twilight dimness of the big

pinet, McGrath did not find it in his soul to marvel that black slimy tentacles from the depths of Africa had stretched across the world to breed nightmares in an alien land. Certain natural conditions produce certain effects, breed certain pestilences of body or mind, regardless of their geographical situation. The river-haunted pinelands were as abysmal in their way as were the reeking African jungles.

The trend of the trail was away from the river. The land sloped very gradually upward, and all signs of marsh vanished.

The trail widened, showing signs of frequent use. McGrath became nervous. At any moment he might meet someone. He took to the thick woods alongside the trail, and forced his way onward, each movement sounding cannon-loud to his whetted ears. Sweating with nervous tension, he came presently upon a smaller path, which meandered in the general direction he wished to go. The pinelands were crisscrossed by such paths.

He followed it with greater ease and stealth, and presently, coming to a crook in it, saw it join the main trail. Near the point of junction stood a small log cabin, and between him and the cabin squatted a big black man. This man was hidden behind the bole of a huge pine beside the narrow path, and peering around it toward the cabin. Obviously he was spying on someone, and it was quickly apparent who this was, as John De Albor came to the door and stared despairingly down the wide trail. The black watcher stiffened and lifted his fingers to his mouth as if to sound a far-carrying whistle, but De Albor shrugged helplessly and turned back into the cabin again. The watcher relaxed, though he did not alter his vigilance.

What this portended, McGrath did not know, nor did he pause to speculate. At the sight of De Albor a red mist turned the sunlight to blood.

A panther stealing upon its kill would have made as much noise as McGrath made in his glide down the path toward the squatting black. He was aware of no personal animosity toward the man, who was but an obstacle in his path of vengeance. Intent on the cabin, the black man did not hear that stealthy approach. Oblivious to all else, he did not move or turn—until the pistol butt descended on his skull with an impact that stretched him senseless among the pine needles.

McGrath crouched above his motionless victim, listening. There was no sound near by—but suddenly, far away, there rose a long-drawn shriek that shuddered and died away. The blood congealed in McGrath's veins. Once before he had heard that sound—in the low forest-covered hills that fringe the borders of forbidden Zambabwe; his black boys had turned the

color of ashes and fallen on their faces. What it was he did not know; and the explanation offered by the shuddering natives had been too monstrous to be accepted by a rational mind. They called it the voice of the god of Zambelwei.

Stung to action, McGrath rushed down the path and hurled himself against the back door of the cabin. He did not know how many blacks were inside; he did not care. He was berserk with grief and fury.

The door crashed inward under the impact. He lit on his feet inside, crouching, gun leveled hip-high, lips asnarl.

But only one man faced him—John De Albor, who sprang to his feet with a startled cry. The gun dropped from McGrath's fingers. Neither lead nor steel could glut his hate now. It must be with naked hands, turning back the pages of civilization to the red dawn days of the primordial.

With a growl that was less like the cry of a man than the grunt of a charging lion, McGrath's fierce hands locked about the octoroon's throat. De Albor was borne backward by the hurtling impact, and the men crashed together over a camp cot, smashing it to ruins. And as they tumbled on the dirt floor, McGrath set himself to kill his enemy with his bare fingers.

De Albor was a tall man, rangy and strong. But against the berserk McGrath he had no chance. He was hurled about like a sack of straw, battered and smashed savagely against the floor, and the iron fingers that were crushing his throat sank deeper and deeper until his tongue protruded from his gaping blue lips and his eyes were starting from his head. With death no more than a hand's breadth from his enemy, some measure of sanity returned to McGrath.

He shook his head like a dazed bull; eased his terrible grip a trifle, and snarled: "Where is the girl? Quick, before I kill you!"

De Albor retched and fought for breath, ashen-faced. "The blacks!" he gasped. "They have taken her to be the Bride of Zamba! I could not prevent them. They demand a sacrifice. I offered them you, but they said you were paralyzed and would die anyway—they were cleverer than I thought. They followed me back to the Manor from the spot where we left the Arab in the road—followed us from the Manor to the island.

"They are out of hand—mad with blood-lust. But even I, who know black men as none else knows them, I had forgotten that not even a priest of Zambelwei can control them when the fire of worship runs in their veins. I am their priest and master—yet when I sought to save the girl, they forced me into this cabin and set a man to watch me until the sacrifice is over. You must have killed him; he would never have let you enter here."

With a chill grinness, McGrath picked up his pistol.

"You came here as Richard Balville's friend," he said unemotionally. "To get possession of Constance Brand, you made devil-worshippers out of the black people. You deserve death for that. When the European authorities that govern Africa catch a priest of Zambewei, they hang him. You have admitted that you are a priest. Your life is forfeit on that score, too. But it is because of your hellish teachings that Constance Brand is to die, and it's for that reason that I'm going to blow out your brains."

John De Albor shivered. "She is not dead yet," he gasped, great drops of perspiration dripping from his ashy face. "She will not die until the moon is high above the pines. It is full tonight, the Moon of Zambewei. Don't kill me. Only I can save her. I know I failed before. But if I go to them, appear to them suddenly and without warning, they'll think it is because of supernatural powers that I was able to escape from the hut without being seen by the watchman. That will renew my prestige.

"You can't save her. You might shoot a few blacks, but there would still be scores left to kill you—and her. But I have a plan—yes, I am a priest of Zambewei. When I was a boy I ran away from my Arab master and wandered far until I came to the land of Zambewei. There I grew to manhood and became a priest, dwelling there until something drew me out in the world again. When I came to America I brought a *Zemba* with me—I cannot tell you how....

"Let me save Constance Brand! I love her, even as you love her. I will play fair with you both, I swear it! Let me save her! We can fight for her later, and I'll kill you if I can."

The frankness of that statement swayed McGrath more than anything else the man could have said. It was a desperate gamble—but after all, Constance would be no worse off with John De Albor alive than she was already. She would be dead before midnight unless something was done swiftly.

"Where is the place of sacrifice?" asked McGrath.

"Three miles away, in an open glade," answered De Albor. "South, on the trail that runs past my cabin. All the blacks are gathered there except my guard and some others who are watching the trail below the cabin. They are scattered out along it, the nearest out of sight of my cabin, but within sound of the loud, shrill whistle with which these people signal one another.

"This is my plan. You wait here in my cabin, or in the woods, as you choose. I'll avoid the watchers on the trail, and appear suddenly before the

blacks at the House of Zomba. A sudden appearance will impress them deeply, as I said. I know I cannot persuade them to abandon their plan, but I will make them postpone the sacrifice until just before dawn. And before that time I will manage to steal the girl and flee with her. I'll return to your hiding-place, and we'll fight our way out together."

McGrath laughed. "Do you think I'm an utter fool? You'd send your blacks to murder me, while you carried Constance away as you planned. I'm going with you. I'll hide at the edge of the clearing, to help you if you need help. And if you make a false move, I'll get you, if I don't get anybody else."

The man's eyes glittered, but he nodded acquiescence.

"Help me bring your guard into the cabin," said McGrath. "He'll be coming to soon. We'll tie and gag him and leave him here."

The sun was setting and twilight was stealing over the pinelands as McGrath and his strange companion stole through the shadowy woods. They had circled to the west to avoid the watchers on the trail, and were now following on the many narrow footpaths which traced their way through the forest. Silence reigned ahead of them, and McGrath mentioned this.

"Zomba is a god of silence," muttered De Albor. "From sunset to sunrise on the night of the full moon, no drum is beaten. If a dog barks, it must be slain; if a baby cries, it must be killed. Silence locks the jaws of the people until Zomba roars. Only his voice is lifted on the night of the Moon of Zomba."

McGrath shuddered. The foul deity was an intangible spirit, of course, embodied only in legend; but De Albor spoke of it as a living thing.

A few stars were blinking out, and shadows crept through the thick woods, blurring the trunks of the trees that melted together in darkness. McGrath knew they could not be far from the House of Zomba. He sensed the close presence of a throng of people, though he heard nothing.

De Albor, ahead of him, halted suddenly, crouching. McGrath stopped, trying to pierce the surrounding mask of interlacing branches. "What is it?" he muttered, reaching for his pistol.

De Albor shook his head, straightening. McGrath could not see the stone in his hand, caught up from the earth as he stooped.

"Do you hear something?" demanded McGrath.

De Albor motioned him to lean forward, as if to whisper in his ear. Caught off his guard, McGrath bent toward him—even so he divined the treacherous intention, but it was too late. The stone in De Albor's hand crashed sickeningly against McGrath's temple. McGrath went down like a

slaughtered ox, and De Albor sped away down the path to vanish like a ghost in the gloom.

5. *The Voice of Zemba*

IN THE DARKNESS OF THE WOODLAND PATH McGrath stirred at last, and staggered groggily to his feet. That desperate blow might have crushed the skull of a man whose physique and vitality were not that of a bull. His head throbbed and there was dried blood on his temple; but his strongest sensation was burning scorn at himself for having again fallen victim to John De Albor. And yet, who would have suspected that move? He knew De Albor would kill him if he could, but he had not expected an attack *before* the rescue of Constance. The fellow was dangerous and unpredictable as a cobra. Had his pleas to be allowed to attempt Constance's rescue been but a ruse to escape death at the hands of McGrath?

McGrath stared dizzily at the stars that gleamed through the ebony branches, and sighed with relief to see that the moon had not yet risen. The pinewoods were black as only pinelands can be, with a darkness that was almost tangible, like a substance that could be cut with a knife.

McGrath had reason to be grateful for his rugged constitution. Twice that day had John De Albor outwitted him, and twice his iron frame had survived the attack. His gun was in his scabbard, his knife in its sheath. De Albor had not paused to search, had not paused for a second stroke to make sure. Perhaps there had been a tinge of panic in the man's actions.

Well, this did not change matters a great deal. He believed that De Albor would make an effort to save the girl. And McGrath intended to be on hand, whether to play a lone hand, or to aid the dark priest. This was no time to hold grudges, with the girl's life at stake. He groped down the path, spurred by a rising glow in the east.

He came upon the glade almost before he knew it. The moon hung in the low branches, blood-red, high enough to illumine it and the throng of black people who squatted in a vast semicircle about it, facing the moon. Their eyes gleamed milkily in the shadows, their features were grotesque masks. Nour spoke. No head turned toward the bushes behind which he crouched.

He had vaguely expected blazing fires, a blood-stained altar, drums and

the chant of maddened worshippers: that would be voodoo. But this was not voodoo, and there was a vast gulf between the two cults. There were no fires, no altars. But the breath hissed through his locked teeth. In a far land he had sought in vain for the rituals of Zambabwe; now he looked upon them within forty miles of the spot where he was born.

In the center of the glade the ground rose slightly to a flat level. On this stood a heavy iron-bound stake that was indeed but the sharpened trunk of a good-sized pine driven deep into the ground. And there was something living chained to that stake—something which caused McGrath to catch his breath in horrified unbelief.

He was looking upon a god of Zambabwe. Stories had told of such creatures, wild tales drifting down from the borders of the forbidden country, repeated by shivering natives about jungle fires, passed along until they reached the ears of skeptical white traders. McGrath had never really believed the stories, though he had gone searching for the being they described. For they spoke of a beast that was a blasphemy against nature—a beast that sought food strange to its natural species.

The thing chained to the stake was an ape, but such an ape as the world at large never dreamed of, even in nightmares. Its shaggy gray hair was shot with silver that shone in the rising moon; it looked gigantic as it squatted ghoulishly on its haunches. Upright, on its bent, gnarled legs, it would be as tall as a man, and much broader and thicker. But its prehensile fingers were armed with talons like those of a tiger—not the heavy blunt nails of the natural anthropoid, but the cruel simitar-curved claws of the great carnivores. Its face was like that of a gorilla, low-browed, flaring-nostriled, chinless; but when it snarled, its wide flat nose wrinkled like that of a great cat, and the cavernous mouth disclosed saber-like fangs, the fangs of a beast of prey. This was Zemba, the creature sacred to the people of the land of Zambabwe—a monstrosity, a violation of an accepted law of nature—a carnivorous ape. Men had laughed at the story, hunters and zoologists and traders.

But now McGrath knew that such creatures dwelt in black Zambabwe and were worshipped, as primitive man is prone to worship an obscenity or perversion of nature. Or a survival of past cons: that was what the flesh-eating apes of Zambabwe were—survivors of a forgotten epoch, remnants of a vanished prehistoric age, when nature was experimenting with matter, and life took many monstrous forms.

The sight of the monstrosity filled McGrath with revulsion; it was abysmal, a reminder of that brutish and horror-shadowed past out of which mankind crawled so painfully, cons ago. This thing was an affront.

to sanity; it belonged in the dust of oblivion with the dinosaur, the mastodon, and the saber-toothed tiger.

It looked massive beyond the stature of modern beasts—shaped on the plan of another age, when all things were cast in a mightier mold. He wondered if the revolver at his hip would have any effect on it; wondered by what dark and subtle means John De Albor had brought the monster from Zambelwei to the pinelands.

But something was happening in the glade, heralded by the shaking of the brute's chain as it thrust forward its nightmare-head.

From the shadows of the trees came a file of black men and women, young, naked except for a mantle of monkey-skins and parrot-feathers thrown over the shoulders of each. More regalia brought by John De Albor, undoubtedly. They formed a semicircle at a safe distance from the chained brute, and sank to their knees, bending their heads to the ground before him. Thrice this motion was repeated. Then, rising, they formed two lines, men and women facing one another, and began to dance; at least it might by courtesy be called a dance. They hardly moved their feet at all, but all other parts of their bodies were in constant motion, twisting, rotating, writhing. The measured, rhythmical movements had no connection at all with the voodoo dances McGrath had witnessed. This dance was disquietingly archaic in its suggestion, though even more depraved and bestial—naked primitive passions framed in a cynical debauchery of motion.

No sound came from the dancers, or from the votaries squatting about the ring of trees. But the ape, apparently infuriated by the continued movements, lifted his head and sent into the night the frightful shriek McGrath had heard once before that day—he had heard it in the hills that border black Zambelwei. The brute plunged to the end of his heavy chain, foaming and gnashing his fangs, and the dancers fled like spume blown before a gust of wind. They scattered in all directions—and then McGrath started up in his covert, barely stifling a cry.

From the deep shadows had come a figure, gleaming tawnily in contrast to the black forms about it. It was John De Albor, naked except for a mantle of bright feathers, and on his head a circlet of gold that might have been forged in Atlantis. In his hand he bore a gold wand that was the scepter of the high priests of Zambelwei.

Behind him came a pitiful figure, at the sight of which the moon-lit forest reeled to McGrath's sight.

Constance had been drugged. Her face was that of a sleep-walker; she seemed not aware of her peril, or the fact that she was naked. She walked

like a robot, mechanically responding to the urge of the cord tied about her white neck. The other end of that cord was in John De Albor's hand, and he half led, half dragged her toward the horror that squatted in the center of the glade. De Albor's face was ashy in the moonlight that now flooded the glade with molten silver. Sweat beaded his skin. His eyes gleamed with fear and ruthless determination. And in a staggering instant McGrath knew that the man had failed, that he had been unable to save Constance, and that now, to save his own life from his suspicious followers, he himself was dragging the girl to the gory sacrifice.

No vocal sound came from the votaries, but hissing intake of breath sucked through thick lips, and the rows of black bodies swayed like reeds in the wind. The great ape leaped up, his face a slaving devil's mask; he howled with frightful eagerness, gnashing his great fangs, that yearned to sink into that soft white flesh, and the hot blood beneath. He surged against his chain, and the stout post quivered. McGrath, in the bushes, stood frozen, paralyzed by the imminence of horror. And then John De Albor stepped behind the unresisting girl and gave her a powerful push that sent her reeling forward to pitch headlong on the ground under the monster's talons.

And simultaneously McGrath moved. His move was instinctive rather than conscious. His .44 jumped into his hand and spoke, and the great ape screamed like a man death-stricken and reeled, clapping misshapen hands to its head.

An instant the throng crouched frozen, white eyes bulging, jaws hanging slack. Then before any could move, the ape, blood gushing from his head, wheeled, seized the chain in both hands and snapped it with a wrench that twisted the heavy links apart as if they had been paper.

John De Albor stood directly before the mad brute, paralyzed in his tracks. Zemba roared and leaped, and the dark priest went down under him, disemboweled by the razor-like talons, his head crushed to a crimson pulp by a sweep of the great paw.

Ravaging, the monster charged among the votaries, clawing and ripping and smiting, screaming intolerably. Zambelwei spoke, and death was in his bellowing. Screaming, howling, fighting, the people scrambled over one another in their mad flight. Men and women went down under those shearing talons, were dismembered by those gnashing fangs. It was a red drama of the primitive—destruction amuck and riot, the primordial embodied in fangs and talons, gone mad and plunging in slaughter. Blood and brains deluged the earth, black bodies and limbs and fragments of bodies littered the moonlighted glade in ghastly heaps before the last of

the howling wretches found refuge among the trees. The sounds of their blundering, panic-stricken flight drifted back.

McGrath had leaped from his covert almost as soon as he had fired. Unnoticed by the terrified worshippers, and himself scarcely cognizant of the slaughter raging around him, he raced across the glade toward the pitiful white figure that lay limply beside the iron-bound stake.

"Constance!" he cried, gathering her to his breast.

Lappidly she opened her cloudy eyes. He held her close, heedless of the screams and devastation surging about them. Slowly recognition grew in those lovely eyes.

"Bristol!" she murmured, incoherently. Then she screamed, clung to him, sobbing hysterically. "Bristol! They told me you were dead! They're going to kill me! They were going to kill De Albor too, but he promised to sacrifice—"

"Don't, girl, don't!" He subdued her frantic tremblings. "It's all right, now—" Abruptly he looked up into the grinning blood-stained face of nightmare and death. The great ape had ceased to rend his dead victims and was slinking toward the pair in the center of the glade. Blood oozed from the wound in its sloping skull that had maddened it.

McGrath sprang toward it, shielding the prostrate girl; his pistol spurted flame, pouring a stream of lead into the mighty breast as the beast charged.

On it came, and his confidence waned. Bullet after bullet he sent crashing into its vitals, but it did not halt. Now he dashed the empty gun full into the gargoyle face without effect, and with a lurch and a roll it had him in its grasp. As the giant arms closed crushingly about him, he abandoned all hope, but following his fighting instinct to the last, he drove his dagger hilt-deep in the shaggy belly.

But even as he struck, he felt a shudder run through the gigantic frame. The great arms fell away—and then he was hurled to the ground in the last death throes of the monster, and the thing was swaying, its face a death-mask. Dead on its feet, it crumpled, toppled to the ground, quivered and lay still. Not even a man-eating ape of Zambabwei could survive that close-range volley of mushrooming lead.

As the man staggered up, Constance rose and reeled into his arms, crying hysterically.

"It's all right now, Constance," he panted, crushing her to him. "The Zemba's dead; De Albor's dead; Ballville's dead; the blacks have run away. There's nothing to prevent us leaving now. The Moon of Zambabwei was the end for them. But it's the beginning of life for us."

Inquisitions

UNDER THE MOONS OF MARS: A History and Anthology of "The Scientific Romance" in the Munsey Magazines, 1912-1920, Edited and with a History by Sam Moskowitz; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 383 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017; 1970; 433pp; \$7.95.

Contents: *Under the Moons of Mars*, by Edgar Rice Burroughs (chapters 3 through 13); *Darkness and Dawn*, by George Allan England (chapters 1 through 6); *Polaris of the Snows*, by Charles B. Stilson (chapters 1 through 5); *Palos of the Dog-Star Pack*, by J. U. Gelsy; (chapters 1 through 3); *Friend Island*, by Francis Stevens (complete); *The Moon Pool*, by A. Merritt (the original novelet, complete); *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, by Ray Cummings (complete); *The Mad Planet*, by Murray Leinster (complete); *The Blind Spot*, by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint (chapters 1 through 4); *A History of the "Scientific Romance" in the Munsey Magazines, 1912-1920*, by Sam Moskowitz, plus Preface and individual introductions to each of the fictional works.

While this is something of a sequel to Moskowitz's excellent *Science Fiction by Gaslight*, it is more of a book for specialists than the earlier volume, for there each story was presented complete, while here it was necessary to rest with significant samples from the five novels represented. The excerpts are well chosen and can stand by themselves as introductions to these popular stories, still enjoyed by many.

As Moskowitz points out, the opening of the hardcover book version (the soft-cover reprints are from this version) differs from the original magazine version in that Burrough's introduction was heavily cut; otherwise, there are no substantial differences between the Munsey magazine and the Ballantine soft-cover editions.

Darkness and Dawn, *Polaris of the Snows*, and *Palos of the Dog-Star Pack* were all reprinted by Thomas Bourey in the Avalon Books hardcover series in the 60's, and may still be available. *Friend Island* has never been reprinted so far as I know; at any rate, it is nowhere generally available outside of this present book. *The Moon Pool* has not been reprinted in its original version since 1949 or thereabouts; *The Girl in the Golden Atom* was last seen in the first issue of *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*; the original version of *The Mad Planet* is nowhere else available, so far as I know. *The Blind Spot* was reprinted by Ace Books in the 60's and may still be available.

I re-read all of these and found them still enjoyable, but somewhat to my surprise found the Leinster story my favorite of the lot. Perhaps it is because I had last re-read the others more recently (with the exception of Francis Stevens's fine story, which I hadn't seen before), but this time *The Mad Planet* seemed much better than the last time, which was somewhere in the 50's.

For me (and Sam told me he wrote it for people like me), the heart of the book is the 143 page *History of the "Scientific Romance" in the Munsey*

Magazines, 1912-1920, which could have been still longer without boring me in the slightest. Since the Munsey Magazines were not published in a vacuum, this account includes much detail about their competitors, and it includes an account of the running feud that H. P. Lovecraft had with a Munsey author (or, more correctly, the other readers of the magazines who liked this author, although HPL didn't stand alone). Even back then, Lovecraft was writing long, long letters and the excerpts from two, plus some verses in relation to the feud, are fascinating reading. No less fascinating is the clear fact presented that HPL was a constant reader of the *ALL-STORY* magazine from its start, and had high praise for a number of its regulars, including Edgar Rice Burroughs. Yet, as Moskowitz points out, neither this constant reading nor obvious pleasure apparently had the slightest effect upon his own writing style or subject matter; you'd never know from his tales that he'd read these writers. This certainly tends to throw doubt upon the old saw that a fledgling author can be ruined by reading popular trash—however, there is one thing to be noted in HPL's case: The Munsey pulps were neither his first nor his only reading in literature before he came upon *ALL-STORY*.

Nearly everything in the history was new to me, so I cannot comment upon the accuracy except to say that I know from personal experience that the author is an indefatigable researcher, and I've seen and been amazed by just a part of the vast collection of magazines, etc., he has gathered. I can report only one error: The date for *AMAZING STORIES*'s first reprint of *The Second Deluge* is given as in three parts: August, September, October 1926. No; that is the date of *AMAZING STORIES*'s

reprint of *A Columbus of Space* (which is correctly stated earlier). *The Second Deluge* was announced as a three-part serial, and started in the November 1926 issue of *AMAZING STORIES*; but when the reader picked up the January 1927 issue, he found it had been stretched to four parts, and he still had another month to go.

Regrettably, there are no illustrations in this excellent book, although were it in my power to have chosen artwork (reproductions of some of the covers described, etc.) at the expense of cutting down the history, I certainly would not have chosen to use pictures. At any rate, this is one volume I intend to read again (in fact, I did read the introductions and history twice), and one I'd cheerfully pay for if that were the only way to obtain it.

My intelligence service tells me that *Science Fiction by Gaslight* did very well, and is still selling well. I hope the report is true and will also be true of the present book, for I should certainly like to see this history continued on up to the end of the Munsey magazines. RAWL

NOTES

1. The George Allan England trilogy was reprinted by Avalon in five volumes: *Darkness and Dawn*, from the August 1940 issue of *FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES*, slightly abridged to eliminate what seemed to me to be needlessly offensive material and a few unbearably corny phrases. (I doubt if the total cutting came to 500 words.)

Beyond the Great Oblivion, was taken from the *FANTASTIC NOVELS* edition of 1941. Since the Avalon Books were fixed in size, the only alternative to crippling cuts was to break the story into two parts, which required a bit of

editorial carpentry. The first part, then, appeared under the title of the complete novel, while the second half (it broke very nicely in the middle) was titled, *The People of the Abyss*.

The final book, also from FN, 1941, was again too long to run in one volume, but not quite long enough to make two volumes. Nor again, did it break well quite at the middle. The first part was titled, *Out of the Abyss*, while the concluding part had the original title of the entire novel, *The Afterglow*. It was necessary to expand various parts of *The Afterglow*, which I did. And, as with the first two novels of the original trilogy, there were a few excisions, of the nature referred to above.

2. The Charles B. Stilson trilogy was published in three hardcover books by Avalon, with very slight cutting in the first, and none at all in the second, *Minot of Sardanes*. The title of the third novel was changed from *Polaris and the Goddess Glorian to Polaris and the Immortals*, and the story had to be abridged, as it just wasn't possible to handle this the way I had solved the problem with England's *Beyond the Great Oblivion*, and *The Afterglow*.

3. The J. U. Giesy trilogy was also published in three hardcover books in Avalon. All three original novels were overlong, and moved at a very slow pace, so that there was no possibility of making two nominally independent books out of each one—and as I recall, the original stories weren't quite long enough for that, anyway. I'd like to see them reprinted unabridged.

BEWARE THE BEASTS. Edited by Vic Ghidalia and Roger Elwood; MB (McFadden-Bartell Book); soft-cover, 160pp; 75¢.

Contents: *In the Aru Observatory*, by H. G. Wells; *The Cats of Ulthar*, by H. P. Lovecraft; *Here, Deemost!*, by August Derleth; *The Hound*, by Fritz Leiber;

The House of the Nightmare, by Edward Lucas White; *The Mark of the Beast*, by Rudyard Kipling; *The Squaw*, by Bram Stoker; *Mettengerstein*, by Edgar Allan Poe; *The Tortoise-Shell Cat*, by Greye La Spina; *The Wendigo*, by Algernon Blackwood.

This is exactly the opposite of Sam Moskowitz's anthology above, in that while Sam's book is for the specialist and veteran reader, this is for the newcomer or the person who is not a steady reader of weird fiction. This sort of person most probably has not seen or had not gotten to full collections of tales by H. G. Wells, H. P. Lovecraft, August Derleth, Bram Stoker, or Algernon Blackwood; and although the Kipling and Blackwood tales may be found in other general collections, they may not have been in any particular one. It is not so much a question of availability (although this certainly enters into it) but a question of whether a given person, who might be attracted to this collection, has actually read more than one or two of these tales. For the audience to which this is slanted, I'd say the odds are in favor of unfamiliarity. And they're heavily in favor of such a reader's not having seen the Derleth, Leiber, White, Stoker, and La Spina stories anywhere. I mentioned to the editor, upon looking over the contents page, that I'd never read the White story before; actually, I find that I'd never read this particular Stoker or La Spina before, either; I'd confused them with other stories by these authors.

Incidentally, Mr. Ghidalia has sole authority on the selection of material for this series, Mr. Elwood handling only the business end.

THE WOOD BEYOND THE WORLD, by William Morris; Ballantine

Adult Fantasy series; introduction by Lin Carter; softcover; 95c.

In saying that this book is the first great fantasy novel ever written, Lin Carter proposes a particular definition for fantasy: "By *fantasy*, I mean the tale of quest, adventure or war set in an invented age and worldscape of the author's own imagination. Of course there are other kinds of imaginative fiction loosely called fantasy: the horror story, for example, can be traced back to Hugh Walpole who founded the Gothic novel with his *Castle of Otranto* in 1764; the 'lost race' yarn, a sub-school of adventure fiction, goes back to H. Rider Haggard and *She*; and Morris was preceded by various writers who wrote occult or mystical or Rosicrucian or Atlantean or Arthurian romances long before he set pen to paper. But fantasy as such, begins with William Morris (1834-1896).

"He was the first major writer to discover and explore the potentials of the story laid in a consciously made-up world where magic works, and gods and monsters, witches and dragons co-exist in a carefully worked out context of subreality...."

And Carter's reason for starting here, rather than with earlier tales and fragments — Gilgamesh of Babylonian legend, Homer, Virgil, the Medieval writers, the novels of chivalry which had so amusingly deplorable an effect upon a gentleman of *La Mancha*, etc. — is that the writers and readers of such tales did not consider them fantasy in the sense that he is using the word. These tales told of marvelous events and doings, certainly, but they were not at all unreal in the eyes of the people of the time — such things happened, such creatures existed, and all had a part in the science of the times. By the close of the nineteenth century — this novel was first published in 1895 — all such matters were excluded by educated people in Western soci-

ety from the real world. The present story, then, can truly be considered the paradigm, and all the fantasy authors of the twentieth-century are beholden to *The Wood Beyond the World* whether they have read it or not.

Unfortunately, William Morris did something else somewhat less praiseworthy. It seemed proper to him, in order to give his story the feeling he wanted to project, to write it in an obsolete style, full of archaisms and without dialogue set off by quotation marks. I do not know how this appeared to nineteenth century readers, although apparently the book was successful commercially; but I find this type of writing affected. It lacks the vigor and conviction of tales and poems written in Middle English, or in any form between those times and the nineteenth century where the author was using forms and expressions that were alive to him in his daily life.

Worse still, too many authors following Morris decided that his method was the proper way to proceed, and only a few have been artists enough in their own right to do this and yet overcome the defects inherent in the practice. There's nothing wrong with giving an archaic feeling when it is appropriate to the story being told. Dunsany does it triumphantly, and H. P. Lovecraft brings it across in the Dunsany-type fantasies, such as *The Doom That Came to Sarnath* and the charming *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*; Tolkien scores, too, and James Branch Cabell is entirely a master of this art.

So while I praise Ballantine for restoring this book, I can recommend it only with caution; it's for students and lovers of old-fashioned fantasy for its own sake. You may enjoy it heartily — that I cannot predict; but there's also a chance that you may find it as tiresome to read (for all the fact that it is a rather good story) as I did.

THE DOUBLE-BILL SYMPOSIUM, by Lloyd Biggle, Jr., Edited by Bill Bowers and Bill Mallardi; William L. Bowers, PO Box 87, Barborton, Ohio, 44203; 1969; 111 pp, including introductions and index; \$3.00.

In 1963, the three parties listed above ran a symposium in the fan magazine *DOUBLE-BILL*, which consisted of the replies from science fiction writers and editors to eleven questions relating to the art of science fiction and the strengths and weaknesses of the art itself, its present state of health as represented by magazines and books, etc. The replies to these questions were published in three installments in the magazine, and at the end of it all in 1964, the weary trio took a solemn oath: *Never again!*

Fortunately, they had the sense (and proper martyrdom — or masochism, if you prefer) to renounce their oath a few years later; and in 1969, the same eleven questions were sent to an entirely different list of science fiction writers and editors. Both times, the percentage of response was exceptionally high, even if some of those replying (as with myself in the first round) did not answer all the questions. What we have here are the returns from both polls; replies to each question are separated into two parts — the 1963 and the 1969 returns, a total of 90-odd persons involved altogether.

What this gives us is a valuable cross-section of opinion, which includes many more pointed and worthwhile tips to now or aspiring writers of science fiction and fantasy than you can hope to find in any book on the subject written by a single person. The price of this book is absurdly low for the value it contains, even for a veteran like myself.

As Algis Budrys noted in his comments in *GALAXY*, the temptation to

quote for twenty or more pages is just barely resistible. What I shall do here, in order to give a representative sample, is to pair each of the eleven questions with what I consider to be one of the best short replies (some are quite long). I shan't quote my own answers, but will be vain enough, at times, to select someone whose opinions are rather close to mine — as I see things today.

Question One: *For what reason or reasons do you write (or edit) Science Fiction in preference to other classes of literature?*

Richard Wilson (1964) writes: "The freedom of expression permitted in the field, plus its lack of taboos, are important factors. Also, in no other accessible field, outside of publishing, are the chances of getting printed so good. (Thanks for the implication that my s-f, or anybody else's, is literature.)

Question Two: *What do you consider the raison d'être, the chief value of Science Fiction?*

James Blish (1964) writes: The best exemplars of it deal with ideas and human relationships and problems that couldn't be handled adequately in any other way. And even the poor stuff — which means, of course, the bulk of it — usually manages to suggest a kind of boundlessness to human aspiration and achievement that is ruled out by the tidy problems, cozy solutions and arbitrary mechanisms of other forms of commercial fiction.

"One oddity about s-f that has always puzzled (and delighted me): among writers, it seems to attract a higher proportion of dedicated craftsmen than does any other idiom I know. This is highly important if you are a writer yourself."

Question Three: *What is your appraisal of the relationship of Science Fiction to the 'mainstream' of literature?*

Philip Jose Farmer (1969) writes:

"There should be no categorization of mainstream or s.f. or other fields, even though we all do it. The elements that make for 'good' mainstream are the same that make for 'good' s-f. The typical s-f reader, I believe, doesn't care for 'literary' values, though I think he should. But then the typical reader of so-called mainstream doesn't care either."

Question Four: Do you believe that participating in fandom, fanzines and conventions would be a benefit or a hindrance to would-be writers?

I didn't answer that question when I had my chance in 1964 and regret having missed the opportunity. Despite my spells of revulsion with fandom in the past (and I may have been in one at the time), the fact remains that had it not been for my associations and activities as a science fiction fan, it's very unlikely that I would have had anything like a career in fantasy and science fiction, either as a writer or editor.

Ray Bradbury (1964) writes: "Very important. Young writers need to know other beginners, to laugh and cry with them over similar problems. I couldn't have survived my teen years without being a member of the L.A. science fiction group which put up the money to finance my own fan magazine, *FUTURIA FANTASIA* when I was 19. Time and again my flagging spirits were sustained by contact with other young writers and older established writers in the field, met at meetings or conventions."

No respondent who can be said really to have been a name in fandom and have come up from fandom, was completely hostile; the most negative were those who arrived with little or no previous fan activities in the first place. *John W. Campbell* (1964) writes: "As they are now — a hindrance! They have become Mutual Admiration Societies — and are highly conformal. Precisely what a good,

new science fiction author should not be."

But to the extent that this is true of fans, it has been true from the very beginning, back in the '30s.

Question Five: What source or sources would you recommend to beginning writers as having been, in your experience, the most productive of ideas for Science Fiction stories?

Lester del Rey (1964) writes: "Science fiction magazines first — it takes a heck of a lot of reading in any field to serve as a background for writing. Second, the current science magazines. The s-f writer who doesn't keep up with honest science is crippled — like a one-legged skier. Above all, avoid like plague any college literary courses or 'little' magazine writing, since the worst slant on science fiction comes from such sources."

Question Six: Do you feel that a beginning Science Fiction writer should concentrate on short stories as opposed to novels — or vice versa? Why?

The area of agreement here is probably larger than on any other of the eleven questions. *Robert Silverberg* (1964) writes: "Short stories, by all means. Many amateurs can find a 3,000-word opening for themselves in a magazine, build their own confidence and technical skills, and then go on to write novels. Beginning with novel-writing is putting too much demand on a beginner's ability, and puts him in immediate competition with every top-flight pro."

Question Seven: What suggestions can you offer to the beginning writer concerning the development of 'realistic' characters and writing effective dialogue?

Clifford D. Simak (1964) writes: "Watch people all the time. See how they act and talk. There is no better way, because you are working with a

true human source. Do a lot of reading. Find out how other writers do it."

Question Eight: *Do you believe that an effective novel requires a message or moral? Please comment.*

Isaac Asimov (1964) writes: "I believe an effective novel will have a message or moral, willy-nilly. I don't think it ought to be put in on purpose."

Question Nine: *To what extent do you think it possible to detect a writer's viewpoints as to politics, religion or moral problems through examination of his stories?*

E. E. (Doc) Smith (1964) writes: "In the case of a skilled craftsman, none whatever—unless he is deliberately waving a flag of some kind or another, and sometimes not even then. To develop his theme a writer can—and does—use any universe he pleases. The universe may or may not (depending upon the message) agree in any given particular with the writer's own opinions or beliefs."

Question Ten: *During your formative writings, what one author influenced you the most? What other factors, such as background, education, etc., were important influences?*

Obviously, this is not a question where one would expect to find much agreement. I would have tried to answer myself, at the time, had I been able to pin down any one author. Yet, some great names do come up more than once. However, let's give Anne McCaffrey (1969) a chance to answer: "The single most important influence on me as a person and a writer was *Islandia* by Austin Tappan Wright. A Merritt, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Edmond Hamilton undoubtedly influenced my thinking towards s-f. I wrote my senior honors thesis on 'Utopic Novels', Evgenie Zamiatin's *We* being the main topic under discussion. It wasn't until 1950 that I began reading, and recognizing, a firm interest in s-f. Then Andre Norton

came within my ken and I read her, and still do, avidly."

Question Eleven: *What do you consider the greatest weakness of Science Fiction today?*

I skipped the question back in 1964, because I was not reading current science fiction at the time; but even had I answered, my answer would doubtlessly be as out of date as any of the other 1964 repliers. In fact, even the 1969 answers may be outdated now—assuming that some of the 1964 answers were valid for the time, and likewise with the 1969 answers. Perhaps some of you will agree with Michael Moorcock, (1969) who writes: "It no longer looks squarely (or even obliquely) at the real problems of the present and future."

To which, I think I'd ask (a) On the whole, did it ever? (b) Should it, really?

None of the excerpts I've given can be considered as a consensus, with the single possible exception noted above. Whether you agree or disagree with the opinions I've selected, you will find others under the same question which disagree with my quotation, and sometimes sharply. If these excerpts bored you, or left you indifferent, then it may well be that you will not find the book worth your while; but if they interested you, then I'd say positively, try to get a copy. RAWL.

THE CONAN SWORDBOOK, 27 Examinations of Heroic Fiction Selected and Edited by L. Sprague de Camp and George H. Seithers; The Mirage Press, Voyager Series; 5111 Liberty Heights Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland, 1969; 255 pp plus introduction and artwork index appended; jackets by George Barr; \$5.95.

Since I have not previously been impressed by the production work on

(Turn to page 124)

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It Is Written

This is the first issue of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* that I've made up since we started to put the pieces together following last year's disaster. What you saw in the last issue, February, No. 35, had originally been intended for issue No. 36; I had it all ready to send out the moment that we could get moving again, and there was no time to try to re-assemble the material originally planned for No. 35, all the copy for which was lost.

And in the process, I learned the bitter truth of a bit of advice I've constantly given to authors: always make carbon copies. I myself had never bothered to make carbon copies of the departments — editorials, book reviews, letter column — so here I am doing it all over. Not 100% all of it; not only was my original editorial for No. 35 lost, I cannot for the life of me recall what it was about — so what you see here is the editorial originally prepared for issue No. 5 of *WEIRD TERROR TALES* at the time when I expected that issue No. 4 would be coming off the press at any moment, and the typesetters would be getting to work on the 5th one. Alas! Issue No. 4 of WWT was lost, too; and due to circumstances too complicated to go into, we shall not be able to continue that magazine at the present time. You see in this present magazine some of the stories that would have been in WTT No. 4. All of them will be used eventually, and I shall run the Victor Rousseau "Dr. Brodsky" series here, as soon as the *Tales From Cornwall* are concluded.

You may have noticed on the contents page that *The Reckoning* has been subsumed into this department. The reason for this is that it is needlessly time-consuming, and otherwise impracticable to have such copy set after the galleys for the rest of the issue have been received and the book laid out page by page. Once we have closed an issue, we want to set only such necessary copy which could not be set earlier, such as house ads relating to issues which were not complete at the time original copy for this issue was set out. Also, it is unkind to our conscientious typesetter; for at the last moment, errors are least likely to be correctable. The sensible thing, then, is to work with the nature of our media, rather than try to force it into patterns unnatural to it because we like them better.

There are two issues to report upon.

Summer 1970, Issue No. 33: This time, only one of the six authors involved received a dislike vote, and that was the editor himself. The sting is somewhat assuaged by the number of you who rated *The Road to Nowhere* outstanding, or put it in first place. It just happens that, as the returns kept coming in, more of you showed preference for the winning story, and I can't feel too bad about being passed in the stretch by Clark Ashton Smith. In fact, I finished just a nose ahead of Edgar Allan Poe — and if I'd voted myself, I'd have finished a nose behind. Here, then, is your verdict.

The Nameless Offspring, Clark Ashton Smith; (2) *The Road to Nowhere*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; (3) *Ligeia*, Edgar Allan Poe; (4) *The Bride Well*, David H. Keller, M.D.; (5) *Camera Obscura*, Ted H. Strauss; (6) *Back Before the Moon*, S. Omar Barker.

Some well-known, even great, authors in our field have become known for the mis-spellings of their names — Isaac Asimov and your editor, to list just two of them — but I really didn't mis-spell Ted H. Strauss' name on the cover and contents page of this issue, just in hopes that it would bring him good luck. No, the reason was sheer stupidity, that's all.

Fall 1970, Issue No. 34: I have always liked the Marion Brandon story in this issue, and believed that some of you would, too. But I'd never have wagered that it would compete so hardly for first place as it did, ending but a few points behind the winning story, and a nose ahead of the placing tale. Here are the finals:

(1) *The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep*, Irvin Ashkenazy; (2) *The Emergency Call*, Marion Brandon; (3) *The Whistling Corpse*, G. G. Pendarves; (4) *Bride of the Wind*, Stephen Golden; (5) *Feminine Magic*, David H. Keller, M.D.

Floyd Peff writes from Canada: "I've read MOH from the first issue, and if asked to name three stories which were particularly outstanding, I would have to name, *The Seeds of Death*, by David H. Keller (No. 3, February 1964); *The Garrison*, by David Grinnell (No. 8, April 1965); and *The Devil's Bride*, by Seabury Quinn (3-part serial, Nos. 26/28, March, May, July 1969). This is not to say that other pieces were not favorably received, but these three stand out vividly in my mind, and I can instantly recall the plots after this length of time. In

particular, the Grinnell number left me with a shudder which few other short stories have done, and I do read a lot of science fiction and fantasy. Strangely, I cannot remember *The Garrison* having been anthologized since its appearance in your magazine.

"MOH must give us more de Grandin. We've had *The Phantom-Fighter* from Arkham House, but apparently no further Quinn will be forthcoming. I've just read Derleth's introduction to *Thirty Years of Arkham House* (just out), and therein he lists projected publications within the coming decade; no book by Quinn is noted. So you see, your publications are the only source of de Grandin that we have.

"By the way, could you not print a picture of yourself? There is a photo of you on the inside back cover of *OTHER WORLDS* (June, 1952), but there you look as if you stepped out of a gangster movie of the 1930's."

Editorial Comment: It's good to hear from a reader who found *The Garrison* as unsettling a tale as I did myself; you would very likely agree with the author (Donald A. Wollheim) about it. The story is reprinted in the collection, *Two Dorian Dragon Eggs*, by Donald A. Wollheim, published in softcover by Powell in 1969. Mr. Wollheim says in his introduction: "One story in this collection spans the whole gap of my writing Career. *The Garrison*, which may be neither better nor worse than any other here, appeared in my notes of the early 1930's as a penciled title and a line of notation. In the 1940's I wrote one page of an opening for it — rather different from the present opening. I typed the first version of the completed story early in the 1950's, single-spaced, and stuffed it away. I dug it out in the early 1960's, typed the final draft and sent it off.

THE MAGAZINE OF HORROR

"Avram Davidson, at that time editor of the *MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*, liked it, but thought it only the start of a novelette — he wanted to know what would happen next, I wasn't interested in what might have happened next. I had said in *The Garrison* exactly what I had wanted to say — I had expressed my surprising idea and that was the whole of what I had to suggest. Let the reader's imagination carry it further...."

That is how, as the author relates, I came to have a look at the story for *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, and I'm delighted that it was published in this form. It may indeed be all wrong from the formal, academic dogma about writing short stories, but I share Lester del Rey's loathing of professorial pronouncements *ex cathedra*. It is not, of course, the one and only way to write *all* weird stories, *all* science fiction, or *all* of anything else—but there are times when a short-short weird tale which presents little more than a glimpse, a mood which may produce a shudder in the reader, is far more effective than the same story worked out at length might have been. There's no such thing as laying down a law whereby you can tell which stories might be more effective this way; you can only judge *ex post facto*.

Now that *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* is a bi-monthly publication, I expect to be using the de Grandin stories there more frequently; so don't you think it might be better to keep *MOH* for non-de-Grandin tales by Mr. Quinn, for which so many readers have been asking? There are a number of fine ones which will not be covered in the forthcoming collection from Mirage Press — which should be out by the time you read this.

So far as a photo of RAWL is concerned: I'm vain enough to run one — but also vain enough to insist that I

get one which looks reasonably attractive to me, and that's not easy.

John Parker writes from Virginia: "My selection for *MOH* No. 34 is: 0 — *The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep*; 1 — *The Whistling Corpse*; 2 — *The Emergency Call*; 3 — *Bride of the Wind*; 4 — *Feminine Magic*.

"Usually, I never comment on the cover, since the basic format is the same. Artwise, I prefer Finlay to Schmand, but because Schmand's illustrations are correlated to stories inside the various issues, I would rather have a Schmand cover. Several of the Finlay covers I have seen before, whereas the Schmand covers have a fresh, new quality about them. Of course, I guess the Finlay artwork, associated as it was with *WEIRD TALES*, helps sell a great many copies of your magazines. Nostalgia does play a part in *MOH*, and the other titles. It would be very interesting to know the average age of your readers. I am 26, and never saw a copy of *WEIRD TALES*. I would rather have covers by Schmand.

"Ashkenazy's story was far and away the best in the issue. The tone and narrative style were familiar, but the plot was unique — to me. The cyclops' change and the final paragraph of the story were very effective. I checked Cockcroft's index and was disappointed in not finding any other stories by Ashkenazy listed in *WEIRD TALES*.

"*The Whistling Corpse* bothered me a little. How had the previous captain dominated the corpse? This was not explained. The conclusion was less than satisfying — a quick unseen battle of an evil spirit versus two good spirits — thrill! The atmosphere and the character of the corpse were the main attractions. The corpse deserved a better end than he got.

"*The Emergency Call* was a simple, well-told tale, and it was not until late in

the piece that I realized the doctor was dead — because of this late realization the story must be judged a success (For this reader).

"I missed the first 'shop' story. So *Bride of the Wind* was my first Goldin story. It seems to me that the author has been reading too many 'Doctor Strange' comic books. I am afraid I have a prejudice against the sword and sorcery type of fiction. It does seem that the 'shop' series might fit better in *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES*. The contest with the wind struck me as trivial and silly. Maybe I will go back and give the first 'shop' story a try.

"The overlord in *Feminine Magic* was a very unsympathetic character — pompous and ignorant. The feminine magic of the title was apparent from the beginning. Cecil was so dense that I almost screamed. Cecil may go down in literary history as the dumbest hero-narrator ever. I look forward to more Tales from Cornwall without the overlord.

"Howard's *A Song of Defeat* I found very enjoyable, and would rate it above both the Goldin and Keller stories. I wish that there were a poem in each issue of MOH. Arkham House has issued many volumes of poetry, proving that there is an interest in macabre poetry.

"I look forward to MOH No. 35."

Editorial Comment: You know, if I'd listed the stories in the Fall issue as it seemed to me that the readers would prefer them, I'd have listed them just as you did. Not, note, in order of my own personal preference; just a prediction as to what the final positions would be. The way *The Emergency Call* contended for first place from the second ballot received was a surprise to me; I expected that it might give Pendarves some contention for second place. As it turned out, *The Whistling Corpse* was never in first place at all, and got into the second place slot only on such occasions as

when the Brandon and Ashkenazy stories were neck-and-neck for first place.

All the Finlay drawings you've seen on our front covers have been reprints, as Finlay only sold one-time reproduction rights to his drawings. Only two of the Schmand covers have actually illustrated any story in the issue, and one of the two can be described only as more or less symbolizing it — *Cross of Fire*, MOH December 1969, No. 30. I'd wanted an actual illustration but was outvoted. (Editor has a vote, publisher has a vote, and the publisher's vote is always a majority.)

I wonder if you aren't a bit over-serious at times, when reading fantasy. Surely Cecil, Overlord of Cornwall, would indeed be the least sympathetic of heroes if the tales in which he appears were they supposed to be serious heroic fantasy. But they never were supposed to be anything of the sort, but rather gentle spoofs on that type of story — not as biting as Cervantes' satire of chivalric novels, *Don Quixote*, but in the same vein. Anyway, we have left Cecil behind us now; he appears in *The Key to Cornwall*, but not as a central character.

You know, I hadn't thought of the "shop" series as "swords and sorcery" fiction, and was about to attempt to show you that you were mistaken — when it suddenly occurred to me that you were very probably right. The narrator is not a Conan-type figure, yet he is, indeed a mighty magician who fights fearful manifestations, often in physically dangerous situations; even if they be in the second sphere, he could still be mangled or done in.... Well, so much for that; but I hope that you'll get the taste for the series as it goes along. You'll find more and more strange backgrounds which hardly any other author of fantasy has touched.

Stuart David Schiff writes: "I must

ay that issue No. 34 was a little bit of a disappointment. The best of the stories would have rated no better than 4th in comparison to issue No. 33. The best story in No. 34 was *The Whistling Corpse*. (2 - *The Emergency Call*; tied with *Bride of the Wind*; 3 - *The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep*; 4 - *Feminine Magic*).

"I'm a little bit prejudiced on *The Whistling Corpse* as I have the Finlay illustration for it, which gave me slightly more pleasure in reading the story, and it just nosed out the interesting 'shop' series story. This seems like a very fertile area for some interesting tales, and I hope Mr. Goldin continues to write them. *Emergency Call* still sent a shudder up and down my spine, even though the ending was obvious. I guess that's what Lovecraft called a confirmation type of story.

Headless Miller was readable, but *Feminine Magic* was a long way to go for one line. I can see why it wasn't published before. It is without doubt the worst of a so-far extremely delightful fantasy-fairy tale series. The Finlay cover was good, but far from the best of this old-time master."

Editorial Comment: Beware, friend, lest a language umpire blow the whistle on your comparatives! You cannot possibly have a "worst" in a series you describe as "extremely delightful", because "worst" is the superlative of "bad" and implies two degrees above it, less bad. Since all the other stories in this series are, as you put it, "extremely delightful", then *Feminine Magic* could only be called the least delightful on your terms. However, by itself, the tale might not make a good introduction to the series, and this may be why Farnsworth Wright did not publish it in *WEIRD TALES*, following *The Bride Well*.

Rod Smith writes from York, Penna: "Here are my ratings for the Fall issue of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*."

"1 - *The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep*: The story is well paced, with a good setting and characters, even though the plot isn't anything special.

"2 - *Bride of the Wind*: A little different - also a little weak on the ending.

"3 - *The Emergency Call*: Characters are too weak. About the only thing we know about the doctor is that he is a good old country doctor, and he is dead. Also, the story ended three pages before the writer decided to stop.

"0 - *Feminine Magic*: This is the first time I've rated a story outstanding in one of these magazines, but this one was good. A good way-out bit of poking fun at man's pride and ignorance.

"4 - *The Whistling Corpse*: This is one of those pulp stories that drags out much longer than any editor should allow."

Editorial Comment: That was quite a curve you threw us, listing the numbers 1, 2, 3 - and then with a zero for outstanding! However, I'm delighted that *Feminine Magic* came across to at least one male reader who wrote in. As I indicated above, it really should be read in the context of the other Cecil stories and I cannot blame the reader who started with it, or with *The Bride Well*, for wondering why the series is so liked by so many.

Mr. C. Marshall writes from New Brunswick, Canada: "In your *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, Volume 5, Number 1, January 1969 (whole number 25), on page 4, named 'Editor's Page', you state in the opening sentence that September 1st, 1930 fell on a Wednesday. I was very surprised and annoyed you should make such an untrue statement. A check

of any 1930 calendar will reveal that it fell on a Monday. Of course, you can work it out mathematically, taking into account the leap years, and you will come to the same conclusion. I should know; my mother was born on that day.

"It is amazing that these facts should not be verified before printing; otherwise, I very much enjoy your magazine! Your comments, please."

Editorial Comment: I did not have a 1930 calendar, as such, nor again would I risk my feeble arithmetical calculations. What I have is one of these desk devices through which by rotating several dials one can get the picture of any month for any date in the twentieth century. After receiving your letter, I re-checked and was very surprised and annoyed to find that you are entirely right, according to my calendar device - which I had used at the time I wrote that editorial, in order to get the day of the week.

What happened? At this late remove, I cannot tell. I might have (a) mis-read the device on that first try (b) failed to write it down, and mis-remembered it by the time I got back to the typewriter (c)

mis-typed Wednesday for Monday, and did not notice.

Memo from Editor to Author: Hey, Stupid! Henceforth and forevermore not only write it down while you're looking at your fancy devices; also re-check before you bring the completed ms. in!

And now, in closing, let me thank all of you (and especially Mrs. Margaret Quinn) for the kind words you have had to say about my editorial in the Fall issue, which was devoted to my own reminiscences of Seabury Quinn. Although I never had the fortune to meet him, I did at times feel as if we were acquaintances from reading his stories; and, of course, his letters did give me some direct personal insights. So what I had to say came from the heart, rather from an attempt to be literary (although these comments of mine are always written, and revised and penciled over, with all such skill as I have at the time), and apparently it went to your hearts. I shall continue to do what I can to keep his memory alive for you by bringing you his stories that have not been collected elsewhere. RAWL.



Inquisitions

(Continued from page 116)

Mirage's books, let me say at once that *The Conan Swordbook* is handsomely presented, from the appealing picture on the front jacket through the many illustrations and designs by artists too numerous to mention, to the excellent portrait of the late Robert E. Howard on the back jacket. Persons who knew REH, or have seen photographs of him, assure me that this is an excellent likeness—he really did look something like Al Capone.

The contents are drawn from *AMRA*, that very literate and fascinating fanzine which started out as the official organ of the Hyborian Legion, a sort of Baker Street Irregulars type club devoted to Conan, and has broadened to include the entire swords-and-sorcery (or, if you prefer, heroic fantasy) field and Robert E. Howard's entire writings. Thus you will find that much of the material herein does not deal directly with Conan, or even with Solomon Kane, King Kull, or Bran Mak Morn. It opens with a letter from Howard relating his conceptions of the European historical background for many of his stories to Harold Preece, and a longer one to August Derleth dealing with the Indian tribes to be found in Texas from the time the white men first landed there to the present. You will find excellent discussions of James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* and T. H. White's *King Arthur* fantasies, by Fritz Leiber; there is de Camp's interesting account of the problems involved in editing Howard's tales for a uniform collection— not many

problems so far as writing is concerned, but difficulties similar to that facing the Sherlockian. Howard, like Dr. Watson, was a somewhat hasty and careless author who did not take the pains to re-read what he had written before, and thus perpetrated numerous inconsistencies and a few irreconcilable contradictions.

There is a symposium on the practicality of swords and other pre-gunpowder weapons, both for fantasy placed on Earth and in other worlds afar; and a revised "informal biography" of Conan, by Clark, Miller, and de Camp, which takes into account all the tales originally published under Howard's name; all those which were revised, adapted, etc., by de Camp or others; and those which have been added to the canon, but have nothing by Howard in them at all. These are, to me, the high points of the book. So far as I am concerned, there aren't any real low points, although I should have liked to have seen more thought given to the few tales which might be considered within the H. P. Lovecraft mythos; what Ben Solon has to say on this subject is interesting, but I don't feel he covers it entirely.

The edition is limited to 1500 copies, and while this review was written within a week of my receiving a copy from Jack Chalker, at the 1970 Lunacon, events immediately conspired to keep it from print until now. A second printing has ensued, however, so let me say that this is heartily recommended to all Howard and Heroic Fantasy fans.

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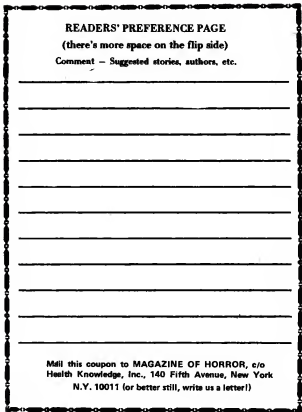
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